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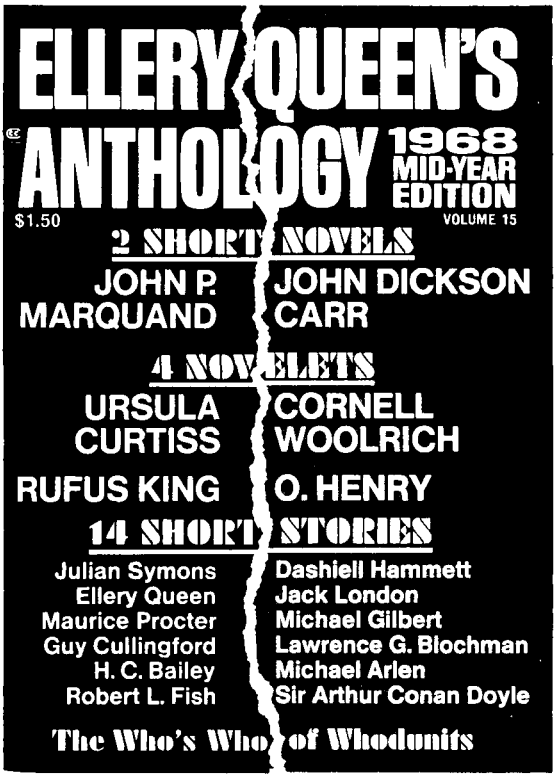

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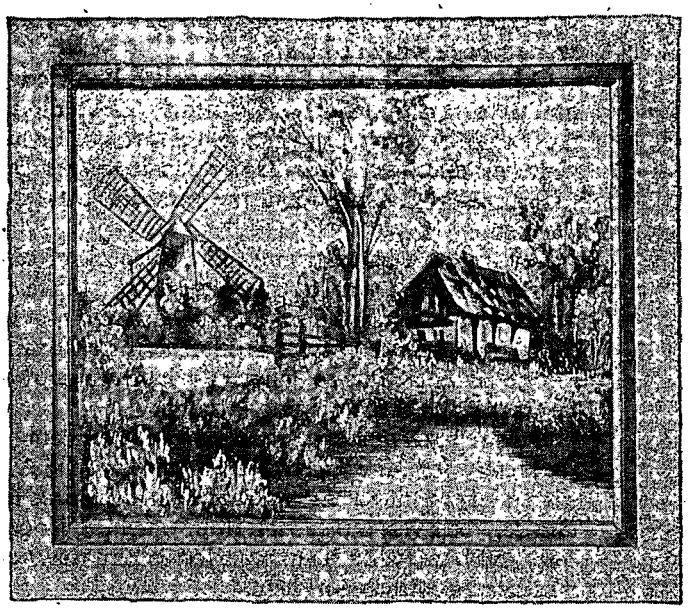

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IN MEMORIAM

Anthony Boucher (1911-1968)

We have lost another of our truly great ones, and how shall we ever manage without him?

Others will tell you of his unequalled knowledge of, and devotion to, mystery writing and writers; of the dignity, the respect, the stature, he brought to the genre through his unmatchable reviews in *The New York Times* and in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine;* of the erudition, the versatility, the gentle humor of the man.

For my own part, I should like to speak of the contributions he made over the years to the success and welfare of MWA. They were many and varied. I have often been told that he was a bastion of strength for our chapter in Northern California, that he could always be counted on to enliven their meetings, that he was someone to turn to if the going got rough.

During my tenure as Executive Vice-President, I called on him frequently for his cooperation in various MWA projects of the time, and was never once turned down. I think he loved MWA and derived a vast satisfaction from watching its growth and progress; and it probably never occurred to him that he was, in a large measure, responsible for them.

He edited one of our annual short-story anthologies, as well as our only true-crime anthology, with the precision and complete dedication that he brought to all his work. And he was a prime mover behind the collaborative novel which members of the Northern California chapter planned and brought off so successfully. And of course he served a term as our President.

The main item on the agenda of our next board meeting will be a discussion of ways and means of memorializing him, of how we may best do honor to his name for ourselves and for posterity.

But the question remains, and I repeat it: how shall we ever manage without him? I am inclined to agree with Ellery Queen, who said of him that "he is irreplaceable." If any person in any field ever earned and deserved that accolade, it was Tony Boucher in the field of mystery writing and criticism.

—James Reach

President, Mystery Writers of America, Inc.

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The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN'S Mystery Magazine

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THE GEMMINY CRICKETS CASE

by CHRISTIANNA BRAND

THE OLD MAN SIMPLY COULDN'T get over it. "Well, my dear boy, delighted to see you, what a surprise! And you're staying for a bit, I hope?" All about them the lawns stretched, velvety green in the bright spring sunshine; over the shining flowerbeds men were working with rake and hoe. "It must be —my goodness!—over twenty years. I wouldn't have recognized you." He went off into fits of elderly chuckles. "What brings you here?"

"The Gemminy murder," said Giles.

"Yes, well you know I'm pretty keen on a murder puzzle. Made it my hobby for years." He thought about it. "Gemminy. The solicitor? The name's familiar but my memory's all to pieces these days. A good chap, I seem to recall." His old mind searched back. "I do remember something in the papers—the Sealed

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Room Mystery, didn't they call it?"

"He was in his office, bolts drawn inside the door, window broken—glass still vibrating; but four stories up. He'd been strangled, then tied to his chair and stabbed. The wound was so fresh that it was still bleeding when the police broke in. But there was no one else in the room."

"Well, my goodness!" He hooked his heavy, veined old hand into the young man's arm. "Give us a haul up this slope and we'll sit on the bench under the mulberry tree—not many gardens nowadays can boast a mulberry, can they?—and you can tell me all about it. I've forgotten—I forget everything nowadays—so you can start from scratch." And his bright eyes shone. "Test me! We'll play a sort of game—Hunt the Murderer. Tell it to me just as the police got it—clues, bits of evidence—not necessarily the truth, you know, but just as it came to them. Let me work it out and see if I can beat them to the solution."

And so they came to the bench, and Giles Carberry sat with him there and told him the story of The Gemminy Crickets Case.

Old Gemminy's office: a bare, square room, not very large. Strong, heavy door. Opposite the door, the single window—one large pane of glass, the glass broken to form a jagged hole about two feet in diameter. A little broken glass on the floor beneath the sill, much more in the deserted warehouse yard four stories below.

And at the desk, between the only window and the only door, Thomas Gemminy, solicitor dealing largely in criminal matters, 70 years old. Tied to the chair with a length of cord torn from the blind, tipped sideways, half asprawl across the paper-strewn desk, staring with empurpled face toward the door; his own silk handkerchief twisted about his neck and, for good measure, a knife-thrust between the shoulder blades; only a little blood, but the wound still oozing. The paper knife which usually lay on his desk was not there.

And at the door, as the police came pounding up the stairs, Rupert Chester hammering, double-fisted, shouting out that there was smoke coming out from under the door, that Uncle Gem wouldn't answer—

"Rupert Chester?"

"Another of his wards—I'll tell you about all that later. He and I had both qualified, we both worked in the office with Uncle Gem."

"All right. Well . . ." The old man considered it, forming the picture in his mind's eye. "The general scene? The buildings opposite?"

Giles Carberry drew angles on the graveled path. "This is the office building—a big old house, actually; we took up the whole top floor. Stairs, no elevator. No one else working there of course on a Saturday afternoon—and the day of the World Cup Final, what's more.

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Street here. These are Rupert's room and mine, looking across the street to the police station opposite. Uncle Gem's was the end room, the corner room; the one window looked out over the warehouse yard, at right angles to the street."

"Narrow yard?"

"Yes, but don't start thinking of rope bridges and pulleys from the opposite roof; or ledges or painters' cradles—all the rest of the story-book gimmicks. They've all been considered and eliminated."

"Don't tell me, don't tell me," said the old man, like a child playing a game.

"Well, but these are facts—not evidence which might or might not be true. And the fact is that no one could have got out of the jagged hole in that window, fifty feet up."

"All right. Well?" He tiddled his gnarled old thumbs. "This Rupert Chester? Another of old Gemminy's wards, you say?"

"Wards, adopted children, whatever you like to call us. His 'Crickets.' Rupert and me and Helen; and lots more of us, of course."

A *good* chap, the old man had said; and so indeed he had been, Thomas Gemminy—good, kind, compassionate. Thrown a great deal by his work among criminals, his heart had bled for innocent families, left to the mercy of a disinterested world. Financial help, assistance in finding new jobs, new homes, often new lives far away from England, where the past would not catch up.

"We used to think the ones he encouraged to emigrate were the ones with really dangerous pasts," said Giles. "But of course we never knew; none of us ever knew about the others—he said it would not have been fair."

While Gemminy's wife had lived, his own home had been open to pitiful children often too young to know their own parentage. The Gemminy Crickets, he called them—one of his foolish, gentle jokes. There was a Gemminy Crickets Trust, to which all those who had passed through his hands might turn for help in time of need; his will left everything to the Trust. "So no clues there; you can leave money out of it."

He had been to great lengths to cover their tracks, even from themselves. Not all of them, of course—Giles himself had been old enough to remember, though dimly, the night when his parents had been hacked to death by the madman with an ax; it was not only the children of criminals that Thomas Gemminy befriended; there had been the victims too. Every one of his Crickets bore the middle name of Gemminy and a new surname, beginning with a C: Giles Gemminy Carberry, Rupert Gemminy Chester, Helen Gemminy Crane . . .

Giles, Rupert, Helen—of them all, in his old age, these had remained closest to him: Giles and Rupert because they had qualified as solicitors and gone into partner-

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ship with him, and Helen, his pet, his darling, last to be adopted into his own home before his wife had died. Helen with her large eyes looking out so bravely and gaily on the world, beneath the cloud of her soft, dark hair . . .

"His Talking Orchid he used to call her," said Giles. "But she's very tough, really. Spent most of her time with us boys, doing everything we did and most things better." The smile died out of his eyes. "All that came out at the trial."

"Don't tell me, don't tell me!" said the old man again. "Let me work it out." He eyed the young man shrewdly. "You were in love with her—very much in love?"

"What do you think? Me and Rupert too."

"Which did she favor?"

Rupert, so sweet-tempered and equable with his blue eyes and the heavy auburn hair so ruthlessly brushed flat, only to come curling up again. Himself, more serious, dark, a little thickset. "One day it would be one of us, one day the other—the little devil! She just played with us. And then when this third party came along—"

"Oh, there was a third party then? It wasn't just one of you three?—the murder, I mean. Suspects one, two, three, and four—you and Rupert and Helen and—A. N. Other?" The old man rose. "Let's walk a little; it's chilly sitting still. And wasn't there something about a policeman murdered too? Old Gemminy rang up the police station with some message?—and later a policeman also rang up?"

Thomas Gemminy in his "sealed room," dying—ringing up the police station across the street with that wild, mad, urgent summons—something about something or somebody "vanishing into thin air," something about "the window" and then on a note of terror, something about "the long arms."

And an hour later, Police Constable Cross, supposed to be pounding his unsensational beat a couple of miles away, ringing up also, with the same crazy gabblings: "Got me by the throat." And something about "the window," and something about "the long arms" and "vanishing into thin air." A phone box had been traced at last with a pane of glass broken; and a hundred yards away, submerged in a tank of water in a half-demolished old factory, the policemen's body, bound and strangled; and stabbed in the back with the paper knife from old Mr. Gemminy's office.

"He came from the police station?"

The same police station—just across the street from the office, where they had all been known so well: Thomas Gemminy and his two young men, in and out every other day pleading, arguing, fighting on behalf of their dubious clientele. There had been half a dozen policemen getting their tea when the message came through—

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down in the basement canteen from whose window they could actually see the windows of Gemminy's offices, four stories up. They'd all dropped everything the minute the name of Gemminy was mentioned and hardly waiting for permission, let alone orders, caught up their helmets and dashed across the street. "So it couldn't have been two minutes from the time he rang—"

"What exactly did he say?"

"I've told you. That he was dying. That someone or something—the policeman answering couldn't make sense out of most of it—had strangled him; that the desk was on fire, he must have help. And then this thing about 'through the window' and then about 'vanishing into thin air.' The policeman kept trying to interrupt him, trying to get the name and address and at last he choked out the name Gemminy and then there was this dreadful scream about 'the long arms.' As I say, within a couple of minutes, a sergeant and at least five of the boys were trying to break down the door."

But Rupert had already got there, beating at it with a closed fist, ramming it with a bruising shoulder, yelling, "Uncle Gem! Uncle Gem!" The sergeant had told off a man to stand at the head of the stairs and watch for anyone trying to escape and then with the rest had launched himself against the door.

Rupert yelled at last, "It must be bolted! There are bolts inside, top and bottom." And finally a panel was stove in and an arm thrust through and up, and a lower panel kicked in and an arm thrust through and down; and as they stood back for one more concerted effort against the stout lock, still holding—into the momentary silence there came from inside the room, thin and clear and eerily tinkling, the sound of breaking glass.

The door gave at last and burst inward and suddenly the smoke-filled room was a flurry of blue-uniformed arms and legs; and there was nobody there, not a living soul.

Not a living soul. Only a dead man, strangled, staring at them across the burning desk, the wound in his back still oozing blood, the jagged edges of the broken window-pane still vibrating, as though someone had the very moment before dived through.

But the hole was only two feet in diameter and the window fifty feet up.

Rupert Chester and a couple of men rushed over to the body, the sergeant and another dashed for the window. Nothing moving, not a sign of life in the yard below—a warehouse yard used for deliveries, swept clean, a shell, an empty space enclosed by blank walls and a high barricaded gate. "Watch," said the sergeant to the man. "Don't take your eyes off it."

A voice called out, spluttering, "Shall we move him, Sarge? He's

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beginning to burn"; then a voice cried, "I'll get the fire brigade," and another voice cried, "Aren't there any extinguishers?" And above them, Rupert Chester's voice choking out, "Look at this! It's Helen! She's in danger. I must go!"

"What do you mean?" yelled the sergeant; but with the smoke getting thicker, one must decide whether to move the body with all its possible telltale clues or risk the whole lot being consumed by the fire; there simply was not time to think of everything. One of the men suggested half-heartedly that he should follow Mr. Chester; but there was too much to do—no one could be spared. And after all, Rupert Chester was known to them—it wasn't like a suspect disappearing, unidentifiable. Besides, Rupert had been on the outside of the locked and bolted door, trying to get *in*.

"No, no," cried the sergeant. "Let him go. Get on with the job!" If there really were some danger to Helen Crane, it was better that someone should rush off and cope with it—and anyway, thank God, here was the fire brigade!

"Was the room badly burned?"

"Most of the woodwork," said Giles. "The furniture and the door itself and so on; and papers, of course. Not much left in the way of clues, once the hoses had doused it all. And of course no sign of the note."

"What note?"

"The note that had made Rupert run off to look for Helen. He said it was on a scribbling pad by Uncle Gem's right hand: huge letters, scrawled *HELEN—DANGER*—some such thing."

"Did anyone else see it?"

"He said he'd shown it to one of the men; but they all denied having seen it."

"That was predictable," said the old man dryly.

Giles did a double-take. "You mean you're *there*?"

"What's 'there'? I'm in a dozen places. If you mean do I see how it could have been done—"

"You haven't heard yet about the dead policeman."

"I don't see how he complicates things. We now have all our suspects—all of them," said the old man with a significant wink, "outside the locked room, free to be running around murdering policeman or doing anything else. Still, tell me about him."

"He was killed about five o'clock. Uncle Gem's call came through to the station at three minutes to four; at five the policeman rang up. And saying almost the same words—that was what made it so uncanny—about 'the long arms' and something 'vanishing into thin air.' First he said, 'George?' — that was the chap on the switchboard; 'This is Dinkum Cross'—that's the nickname he had at the station—and gave his number and just as he was saying where he was calling from, he seemed to be disturbed and there came this fright-

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ful shouting, again about somebody strangling him, just like Uncle Gem, and the word 'window' and 'vanished into thin air'—and then a scream and the switchboard man could just make out the words 'the long arms.' And as I told you, they finally found a call box with a broken windowpane and they searched around there and the policeman's body was found in this half-demolished factory a hundred yards away."

They came to the end of the graveled path and turned back. "Your murderer seems to have been very fortunate in the privacy of his arrangements."

"Well, but they *were* arrangements, weren't they? And what arrangements! Saturday afternoon and the final of the World Cup and every soul glued to the telly—and for good measure a wet blustery day; gorgeous weather over most of the country but not for us."

They came to the bench and sat down again; the old man tired easily. From below came the whirr of a mower; the lawn was striped in paler and darker green as the grass bent obediently to the cropping blades. But the old man's mind was in a sealed room, locked and bolted, where a dying man had been stabbed—and yet where no living man could have been; in a phone box where a country-town policeman choked and yammered and, presumably within a few moments, also died.

"Any actual connection between the two deaths?" asked the old man.

"The same words spoken—'into thin air' and this horrifying thing about 'the long arms.' And it was the knife from Uncle Gem's office and traces of his blood group were mingled with the murdered policeman's. It was all a good bit diluted by the water—he'd been heaved into a half-destroyed, tipped-over watertank. Tied up with some wire rope which had been lying about there."

"I see. All right. Well, those are the facts," said the old man, rubbing his hands. "Now let's have the alibis."

"Rupert's and Helen's and mine?"

"And A. N. Other's—we mustn't forget Helen's third suitor. I am assuming," said the old man, "that if money was out of it, the motive had something to do with Helen?"

"That was the conclusion the police came to," said Giles. "And you want to play it from the police angle?" He thought it over. "Well, here's the order of events—which establishes the alibis as it goes along."

"True or false?"

"Just as the police got them," said Giles.

In a way the ball had started with P.C. Cross: finishing his dinner in the canteen, pedaling off to his beat, not thought of again until the telephone call at five o'clock; his body found an hour or so later in the disused factory.

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"The next exact time we know is when I went to the office to see Uncle Gemminy."

Mr. Gemminy had stayed on there because he wanted to talk to them—to Giles and Rupert, but separately. "I was to be there at half-past two, Rupert at four. He didn't want to talk at home because Helen might be there—she still lived with him; Rupert and I shared a flat about fifteen minutes' drive from the office. Anyway, the thing was that this third party had turned up and the old man didn't like it. Who the chap was we didn't then know but I think he'd guessed and he wasn't too pleased. He thought she'd had her head turned, that she didn't know her own mind; and anyway, he would have liked to 'keep it in the family.' Anyway, he wanted to sort it out with Rupert and me and find out how we each felt about her before he did anything more. But nothing terrific, you know—just a family discussion."

"All right. So at half-past two you went along."

"Mm. Leaving Rupert at the flat. We had a very affable chat, the old man and I. I told him my side of it and at half-past three I left and he was safe and sound then. And don't say he wasn't," said Giles, "because he was. He phoned Rupert after I'd left; and it wasn't till four o'clock that he phoned the police."

"Yes. Well?"

"Well, I drove home. I parked the car and just as I came round the corner to the front door, I saw Rupert running down the steps, hatless, carrying his mac in spite of the rain, as though he'd just snatched it up as he left the flat—and he scrambled into his car and went shooting off."

"Why in such a hurry?"

"Because, so he says, Uncle Gem had just rung him up—"

"The exact words, please."

"Well, Uncle Gem said first, 'Haven't you started?' and Rupert said, 'I was just leaving; isn't Giles still with you?' and Uncle Gem said, 'No, he went at half-past,' and was just saying something about having had a good talk with me when he broke off and said, 'I don't like it. There seems to be something funny happening outside the window.'"

"Fifty feet up?"

"Well, that's what he said; and then, 'Do come quickly, Rupert, I don't like this.' So naturally Rupert whizzed off not even taking time to put on his mac."

"Or to ring up the police station first—just across the road from your uncle."

"Well, I don't think one would, do you?" said Giles. "He says it never entered his head."

The old man thought it over. He said dryly, "Very convenient for *you*, dear boy. Because if you were seeing Rupert outside your flats, then you weren't back at the office, a quarter of an hour away, murdering your uncle, were you?"

"*If* I was seeing him," said Giles.

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"The police thought of that one—don't worry! They thought I might have noted where his car was parked, deduced that he'd run out—he always does everything at the double. It was the macintosh that clinched it."

"On such a day you could hardly have guessed that he wouldn't be wearing it. I think it does let you out."

"And Rupert. Because if I saw him outside the flats he couldn't have been half a mile away killing Uncle Gem, either."

"He didn't die till after Rupert could have got to the office."

"Yes, but things had already started. He said so to Rupert."

"So Rupert says," said the old man. He changed his tack. "And meanwhile—Helen?"

"Helen was out of it," said Giles quickly. "She was walking, up on the heath—and the heath's fifteen miles away."

"What, the whole afternoon? On such a wet blustery day?"

"She does it to keep fit. She does film work—stunt stuff, really, in a mild sort of way—the stand-ins, riding and diving and skiing and shooting, all that lot. I told you we boys brought her up tough."

"Plenty of people saw her on the heath, I daresay?"

"You said it yourself—who would be up there on such a day?"

"Then who says she was there?"

"I say so. I'd arranged to meet her there."

"And did you?"

"No," said Giles. "But that was my fault. I mucked up the arrangements. The heath's a huge place. I said to go on and I'd meet her—well, after I'd left Uncle Gem, but I couldn't tell her that, she didn't know I was seeing him. I just said about half-past four by the Bell, which is a pub. But she thought I said at the Dell, which is a place where we sometimes picnic. They do sound the same if you mumble."

"And did you mumble?"

"Yes, because I didn't want Rupert to hear. The fact is, I thought I'd get in first, after seeing Uncle Gem. All's fair?" said Giles, with a faintly self-deprecatory air.

"All right. A quarter to four. Helen's up on the heath without an alibi; you and Rupert alibi each other outside your flat. What's your story, next?"

"My story, as you so flatteringly call it, is that I went in, made myself a cup of tea—I said I'd meet her at half-past—and then drove up to the Bell. And Rupert's story is that he couldn't get into Uncle Gem's office and was hammering at the door when the police arrived and broke it open. He went in with them and then he saw this note on the desk and he was so shaken by the murder and then this note on top of it that he never stopped to think but just rushed off to look for Helen. She wasn't at home, he rang round frantically to a few friends, nothing doing there; so he

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got into the car again and drove about just stupidly searching in places where he thought she might be."

"Did the places where he thought she might be happen to take him near the scene of the policeman's death?"

"It's all within a smallish area," said Giles briefly. "A couple of miles or so. Except of course for the heath, and that's where she was—half an hour's drive away from any of it. Rupert went out there eventually, knowing she often walked there on week-ends. But as I say, it's a huge place and in the end we all missed each other."

"So at the time of the policeman's murder—about five, you said?—Helen and Rupert have no alibis? And you?"

"I'm afraid you will find this very 'convenient' too," said Giles, "but yes, I have one for this time also. I waited for Helen about twenty minutes and then I thought she might have decided not to come, it being such a filthy day; so I rang up the house to ask. The housekeeper will tell you so."

"You could have done that from anywhere."

"Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I did it from the call box outside the pub. And I can prove that because I had no change and had to knock up the pub people and ask for some. In fact, I asked them first if they'd seen Helen—we know them quite well; and then for some change which they gave me and dashed back to the World Cup on telly."

"Well, I must say, that's pretty conclusive."

"The police thought so too," said Giles, dry in his turn.

"So that leaves Rupert and Helen."

"And your friend, A. N. Other. And perhaps you'll explain to me," said Giles. "not so much which one killed Uncle Gemminy as how anyone *could* have. The door locked—the key was in the debris of the burned out desk, by the way—and bolted from the inside. The window was fifty feet up and a child couldn't have got through the hole in the glass. Yet it had just that moment been broken and Uncle Gem had that moment been stabbed. So before we have accusations, I think there should be an explanation."

The old man shrugged up to the thick lobes of his ears. "Oh, well, as to that, there are probably half a dozen. I can think of three straight off—one for each of you: one for Rupert, one for Helen, one for my friend, as you call him, A. N. Other . . ."

Giles reacted immediately. "Why should Helen do such a thing? You agree that this crime was committed *because* of her."

"If it was," said the old man, "who more interested than herself?" He brushed aside an interruption. "Thomas Gemminy was discussing the marriage of his precious ewe

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lamb. He knew all the past histories, the heredities—he could tell what might forever put an end to any idea of marriage between Helen and—somebody. So—somebody silenced him. And somebody set fire to the desk where dangerous documents might be kept.

"Well, all right, so you say. But I say, how?"

The old man was silent a while, deep in thought, the sunshine beating down through the leafless branches of the mulberry tree, dappling his big bald head with light and shadow. Giles prompted at last, trailing a red herring across that other name: "Take Rupert—"

He seemed to come awake. "All right, very well, take Rupert. Rupert pretends a telephone call from Mr. Gemminy to give him an excuse to hurry off and get there early; or perhaps even gets one, telling him you've left and he may as well come along now—and so is sure that you're out of the way. He strangles the old man, ties him to the chair, conceals the knife about himself somewhere, and comes out, locking the door behind him. When the police arrive, he's pounding on it. He suggests that it's bolted on the inside and when the panels are broken, he's the first to thrust through his arm and pretend to draw back the bolts—which, of course, never were shot at all. The lock gives way, they all tumble in and he goes in with them. Chucks the key into the fire raging round the desk—and that's all there is to it." He asked as a child asks, playing Hunt the Thimble: "Am I getting warm?"

"Not frightfully," said Giles. "What about the stabbing, for example?"

"The oldest trick in crime thrillers, my boy. Bends over the body pretending to be frantic with anxiety and jabs in the knife. So recently dead, there'd still be a little ooze of blood."

"All this in front of half a dozen policemen?"

"In a crowded room filled with smoke with everyone excited and milling about—"

Giles clutched at a straw. "But the window! They heard the glass being shattered just as they were actually breaking in."

"They heard glass being shattered," said the old man. "Which is rather a different thing."

"The broken pane was still vibrating."

He shrugged again. "Something thrown while Rupert's hand was through the panel—a piece of the panel itself, perhaps; it would be burned up afterwards in the fire. Or the window was broken in advance and a piece of glass kept for just this purpose—there was a little glass found inside the window sill, wasn't there? A lucky shot hit the broken pane and started it vibrating again; but all that was needed was the sound."

"Good God!" said Giles. He could not help a grudging admira-

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tion. "You certainly have it all worked out."

"You said it couldn't be done. I'm only telling you one of half a dozen ways in which it could. This is the way it could have been done by Rupert."

"Well, all right then, that's Rupert. But what about the note?"

"No note, of course. An excuse to get himself out of the room."

"Why?" said Giles.

"Ah, why? To deal with the policeman? The policeman on his beat had seen something, perhaps?"

Giles' scepticism began to revive a little. "Seen what? There was nothing to be seen. Rupert got there a bit early, so what? He made no secret of it, he accounted for it anyway by saying that Uncle Gem telephoned him. He had no reason to kill the policeman."

"I agree," said the old man calmly. "And if he didn't kill the policeman, no doubt he also didn't kill Mr. Gemminy."

"So Rupert's out. And if he's out, if he was innocent, then there really *was* a note saying that Helen was in danger."

"I daresay there was," said the old man.

"But Helen wasn't in danger."

"I daresay she wasn't," said the old man.

"Then who put the note there about Helen?"

"I daresay Helen put it there," said the old man. "A tough girl. A girl trained to ride and climb, to shoot straight, to throw straight—a girl beating you boys at your own game. A girl in love, whose guardian disapproved of her romance and had the power to end it forever—he who knew the secrets of so many pasts. A girl with half an hour to work in, between one interview and the next . . . Am I getting warm?"

"No, of course not," said Giles. "It's all nonsense. How could she have done it? She was nowhere near when the door was broken down. And in that case the bolts really were drawn on the inside."

"Oh, well, bits of string passed under the door—you know, all that lark. The door was destroyed by fire and the bits of string with it. One good reason why the fire was started."

"But the knife wound? The broken glass?"

"The glass was broken in advance, of course—a hole two foot in diameter. And the victim, dying or dead, tied to his chair with his back to the hole in the glass. For the rest—a warehouse roof opposite, a narrow yard. She could throw straight, couldn't she?—a knife no doubt as well as anything else. As to the glass, why assume that the glass was broken, at the time they heard it breaking, from the *in*side? After all, there was some, as we've just seen, inside the sill. She'd be pretty handy with a slingshot, I daresay? You boys will have seen to that?"

"But why? Why?"

"To mystify. To make it all

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happen when she was supposed to be nowhere near." He looked into the young man's white face, curiously. "It's all only a game. But you don't even like to hear it said."

"I've heard it all said once already," said Giles, "when it was not a game. The police are not fools, you know, either. Only—not being fools—they asked themselves two further questions. Why leave the note?"

"To make Rupert do just what he did—run out and leave himself without an alibi for the time the policeman was killed."

"And so that brings us again to: why kill the policeman, anyway?"

"The policeman came from the same station as the rest—the only station, I suppose, in that little town? And as he pedaled off to his beat, may he not have glanced up and seen—someone on the roof of the warehouse with a slingshot? But when the news of the murder broke—then he'd put two and two together, wouldn't he? So she had to shut his mouth. She recognize him? Like the rest of you, she'd know all the chaps at the station, at any rate by sight?"

"We all knew him," said Giles. "And by the same token, a solid-built chap he was. So how—?"

"You told me she was a tough girl," said the old man.

"Tough enough to drag him, dead or dying, to that place a hundred yards from the call box, heave him into the tank?"

"Yes, that has to be accounted for," acknowedged the old man.

"And the knife—if she'd thrown the knife it would still have been in the wound when the police broke in. *She* wasn't in the room, to take it away. You'll hardly suggest, I suppose," said Giles, heavily sarcastic, "that she yanked it back with a piece of string? Or some sort of boomerang knife, perhaps?" He relaxed against the hard back of the bench with an absurd relief. "You old devil!—you never really believed she killed Uncle Gem."

Bright eyes, alight with mockery. "No. Not that."

"And so—we come to A. N. Other?"

"And the boomerang."

"Boomerang—what boomerang? I was only joking about a boomerang knife."

"Any boomerang," said the old man. "Not a knife, no. Just any boomerang." He left it at that, sat for a time, thinking. "We have at this stage, I take it, all the information that the police had to work on? True or false. So . . . So I put myself in the position of the police and I ask myself which are the most important questions. And I reply to myself that they are as follows: first, why was the policeman killed? Second, why was he killed in the way he was? Why were both men killed in such a way—strangled, tied up, and then, dying or already dead, stabbed in the back. And third, why did both phone in

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that strange phrase about something 'vanishing into thin air?' What was meant by the horrible screaming about 'the long arms?' And fourth, I ask myself—why, when Rupert says he showed the note to somebody, everyone denies having seen it. And fifth and sixth and forever *ad infinitum*, I ask myself the most important question of all: in that room that afternoon——dead man locked in, wound still bleeding, window just broken, desk in flames, and all the rest of it—why did someone call out that he was going for the fire brigade?" And he added, laughing, that seventh and eighth and ninth he asked himself, "Am I getting warm?"

"Very warm," said Giles.

"The call to the police station said that the room was on fire. Surely, while the men rushed across the street to the rescue, they could expect the remaining staff to follow the obvious routine and send for the fire brigade?"

"Fire or no fire," said Giles, "you are getting positively hot."

"And P.C. Cross had not been seen since he'd left after his dinner and gone off to his beat?"

"Scorching," said Giles.

"Which brings us back to the boomerang, you see."

"I don't know what you mean about this boomerang."

"Only that it's an Australian word, and when you used it a moment ago, you made me think. Because 'dinkum' is an Australian word too, isn't it? And that was the policeman's nickname, wasn't it?—Dinkum Cross."

We used to think that the ones he encouraged to emigrate were the ones with really dangerous pasts . . .

A child with a bad background sent away for his own safety and peace of mind. Returning in manhood under the wing of the kindly old guardian, joining the police force with his help and encouragement—a Gemminy Cricket like the rest of them, unacknowledged as such so that the past would not catch up with him. Through his work coming in contact with his brother Crickets; getting to know Helen, his sister Cricket; falling in love. His heredity such that their guardian would never permit a marriage between those two.

"Helen, of course, would have told him all about the arrangements for that afternoon—she'd hardly be so incurious as you all innocently supposed, when it was her business you were going to discuss. From the corner of the warehouse yard he watched you come and saw you leave. Mr. Gemminy observed him there, rang up Rupert, and told him to hurry because there'd been something rather odd going on below the window. In the middle of that conversation the murderer came into the office." He broke off. "Still hot?"

"Very hot—but also very cold," said Giles.

"Now he must work fast because

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Rupert's on the way. He strangles the old man, stabs him for good measure, sets fire to the desk, smashes a hole in the window to create a draft to fan the flames—and it's done. His secrets will be burned to ashes, the only one in the world who was aware that they even existed is dead. No one knows who he is. Not even Helen will connect him with the murder. He closes the door and is starting off down the stairs when he hears—"

"He hears Rupert arriving, I suppose," said Giles. "So it's too late to escape that way."

"What would the murderer do?" asked the old man. He thought that one over too, unhurriedly. "*I* think he would dodge into the nearest room—would that be your office? Oh, Rupert's—he'd dodge in there, meaning to wait until Rupert was inside the smoke-filled office, trying to cope with what he found there—before slipping out again and clearing off down the stairs. But—"

"But?"

"But he'd locked the door. An automatic gesture, wouldn't you think?—a symbolical gesture, closing the door on the terrible past and the terrible thing he'd done. He'd locked the door of the murder room instinctively, simply not thinking, and dropped the key into his pocket. So Rupert couldn't get in."

"And he was a few feet away in Rupert's room—and he couldn't get out?"

"Until—?"

"Until a whole lot of men in blue uniforms just like his came tearing up the stairs and started banging at the locked door. Who was to notice in that confined space on the landing, with smoke already coming out from under the door, that they had been joined by another of themselves, all ramming one, two, three together now, against the door. And someone says something about bolts, and that's the cue to break in the panels and put in his arm and pretend to draw the bolts back. But surely," said Giles, "he wouldn't really have gone unrecognized?"

"The room was on fire, filling with dense smoke; doubtless people were holding handkerchiefs to their faces, voices were choked and unrecognizable. Voices saying something about fire extinguishers, something about going for the fire brigade—"

"So as to get himself out of the room?"

"There you have it, my boy, and how clever, after all! Not a suspect escaping, you see, but just one of themselves, shouting to the man at the top of the stairs something about getting the fire brigade. He'd tried a better way—while he waited in the other room he'd scrawled the note about Helen being in danger, hoping to be allowed to go after Rupert when Rupert, predictably, dashed off. But that one didn't work, so he had to fall back on the

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fire brigade. For an improvisation it was pretty good." He humphed and smiled. "Hot?"

"In parts," said Giles. "One tiny point, however, strikes a chill. What about Uncle Gem's phone call to the police? What about these strange remarks—'vanishing into thin air' and 'the long arms'."

"Your Uncle Gemminy—but my dear fellow, good heavens, you haven't got the point at all! You don't suppose—?" He broke off, rubbing his thick hands together with a self-satisfied chuckle. "Just put yourself into the picture, boy! Rupert beating on the door. Murderer crouching in a room a few feet away, in Rupert's own room. And very soon, what is Rupert going to do? He's going to stop panicking, dear boy, he's going to use his head—he's going to come into his own room and telephone to the station just across the way. Only one thing will prevent him—and that is the arrival of the police before he calls them. So . . . From the window the murderer can see down into the canteen—half a dozen chaps there who will, as he well knows, leap up and come dashing over if the message is urgent enough. So—the gasping and the choking, disguising the voice, the feigned terror, the hint of something 'coming back'—the mystification of a lot of nonsense about 'the long arms' and 'vanishing into thin air.' And in due course over they come; and in due course off he goes!"

"To a telephone booth where he binds and gags himself, rings up the police with a message almost identical with the earlier one, and then moves on to a convenient hiding place and there quietly murders himself?"

"Murder?" said the old man. "Would you call it murder?" And he turned his big frame so that he stared directly into Giles's tense, white face. "I thought you would be more likely to regard it as—an execution."

Giles sat up very straight. "Are you suggesting that I—that *I*—"

"*You* were up on the heath, dear boy; you have your alibi and there's no breaking that if people actually spoke to you there."

"Rupert then?"

"But could Rupert have known that the policeman had murdered your guardian?"

"Nobody could have known at that stage," said Giles. "No one even knew that Uncle Gem was dead, except for the police—and of course the murderer."

"So the murderer must have told someone, mustn't he?"

"Told who? He'd hardly have come to Rupert or me."

"No," said the old man. "So who *would* he have gone to?"

"Dear God, you mean he told *Helen?*"

"Need he have told her? But on the other hand, may he not have had a date with her for that afternoon?—that important afternoon

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when their joint future was being discussed. She has a date with you but she'll ditch that, pretend she had confused the meeting place. And—well, he arrives. Something shows in his face, perhaps in his manner, and there's blood on his uniform—traces were found later, you said."

"The blood was from the knife. Why should he have brought away the knife?"

"Fingerprints? Maybe he got flurried—he had less time than he'd counted on. If they found his prints on the knife that would be the finish. He wrapped it hastily in something and brought it away with him."

"And Helen?"

"Suppose she discovered it—maybe he dropped it or something, he'd have been pretty nervous. And she deduced what had happened, got it away from him perhaps, and in her rage and agony about your uncle, struck out at him—"

"The man was strangled," said Giles, white-lipped.

"After all that immersion I daresay it wasn't easy to be sure which happened first. Anyone can stab a man in the back—not too hard for a strong young woman, and especially after he'd been weakened by the stab wound, to finish him off. And that might explain how she got him to the hiding place—dragged him along, still alive but stupefied with pain and weakness, tied him up when she got him there and once he was totally helpless—"

"Dear God!" said Giles again. He fought against it—the very idea was revolting. "The telephone call—"

"At the knife point? Perhaps he told her how he'd tricked the police, perhaps he'd confessed—freely or at the knife point, as I say. So she forced him to do the same thing again, use the same phrases, carry on the mystery, the strangeness, the hint of some horrible magic that he'd already begun when he killed Mr. Gemminy."

The old man looked suddenly, keenly, into the white sick face. "My dear boy, this is still only a game, isn't it? Or if it's the truth, then you surely can't go on caring for her that much? Yet you can't bear even to have her name mentioned in such a connection."

"You could hardly expect it," said Giles. "I've been in love with her all my life. To ask me to accept—even in a game, as you say—that in ugly revenge, in red-hot rage, she could do such a thing—"

"Better, all the same, than if she had done it dispassionately? Better than if she had done it, not in grief and anger, but deliberately, in cold blood?" And he asked, "What did you know, after all, about this girl? What if it was really a case, not of what Mr. Gemminy could tell Helen about her lover, but of what he could tell her lover about *her*?"

The sun was going down; it was growing chilly. "Let's walk up and down just one more turn, and then we must go in and get some tea."

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The old man got up and took Giles's arm and walked with him again along the narrow path, away from the mulberry tree. "This young policeman—after all what could there have been that was so very bad about his past? He'd been brought back to this country, allowed to join the police. Would Gemminy have been so very rigid, so positively against a marriage, unless there had also been something on the other side? Or perhaps it was only on Helen's side that the bad heredity lay?"

"She's as good as gold," said Giles.

"But we're speaking not of *her* sins but of the sins of her forefathers." Giles jerked away his arm but the old man caught at it again and held him fast. "Supposing Helen was not in love with the policeman, after all? Supposing it was one of you two? She was amusing herself perhaps—playing hard to get, I believe they call it—teasing you, making you jealous. But of course Mr. Gemminy doesn't know that; and he talks very seriously to the young man, tells him for his own sake as well as for Helen's that two such heredities should not mix, that if necessary he will prevent it. So the young man kills him; and coming to Helen with the blood of her beloved guardian still fresh on his hands, he reveals that he now knows secrets of *her* past—and if she will not marry him, he will reveal those secrets to prevent her marrying someone else. Would you have married her under these circumstances? Would Rupert? Would you two not always have been looking over your shoulders, asking yourselves what your children would become?"

He paused and glanced away. "I think," he said, "that this was not only an execution, though that may have been the excuse the killer gave to herself for killing the policeman. I think it was like the setting fire to the desk—a safety measure." And his bright old eyes swiveled again to Giles's set face. "Am I not getting *very* hot?"

"You are getting as cold as ice," said Giles, very cold himself. "You were burning your fingers, but now you've taken your hand away from the truth, and you're cold again." And he pointed out, "The whole object of Uncle Gem's talks was to 'keep it in the family'—he *wanted* her to marry either Rupert or me. And he'd hardly have wanted that if her heredity had been so bad that she would commit murder to keep it secret."

They had come to the end of the path; they turned now and started back toward the great spread of the mulberry tree and the bench beneath. From far off a gong sounded; and below them as they walked down the incline of the little hill, gardeners were straightening up, stretching, gathering their tools. "So," said the old man, "we are to leave Helen out of it, are we?"

"Of course," said Giles. "As if Helen could have—" And the hot

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white mist that always invaded his mind at the thought of Helen accused of a crime welled up now like a miasma. When he emerged from it, the old man was embarked again on his five questions.

"Only they have perhaps changed a bit in order of importance. We asked ourselves why none of the police admitted having seen the note about Helen, why someone should have gone for the fire brigade which would already have been on its way, and we found the answer to both questions—the murderer failed to get himself out of the room by one means and resorted to the other.

"And we asked ourselves the meaning of those strange phrases about 'vanishing into thin air' and 'the long arms'—and we know they were dragged in only to confuse the issue. And we asked ourselves why your uncle was killed in the way he was—tied up, strangled, and stabbed—and we know that this also was to cause confusion, that all the details, the recent stabbing and the broken window and the undrawn bolts were to cause confusion, to suggest that he had been killed at that moment by someone inside a locked room which in fact proved empty.

"But we asked ourselves one question which has not yet been answered and this now becomes the crucial question: why was the policeman killed? Because when we outlined an otherwise watertight case against Rupert, this was the point that exonerated him. Rupert had no reason whatsoever to kill the policeman."

Giles walked beside him, slowly, supporting the shuffling steps down the gentle slope. "You are very hot now. Burning. Because, yes, that is the crucial question. Why was the policeman killed?"

"To avenge the murder of your Uncle Gemminy," said the old man. "And that means it was one of you three—you or Helen or Rupert. But you're out of it, as we know, and I accept that Helen also is out of it—that was only a tarradiddle I gave you because you challenged me, because you said she couldn't have done it. So we have to come back to Rupert."

"But we come back also to the question we asked before: why should Rupert have killed the policeman? Revenge, you say. But how could he have known that the policeman was the murderer?"

"Because in searching for Helen," said the old man, "he stopped a policeman and questioned him, asked him if he'd seen any sign of her. And recognized him as the policeman he'd shown the note to, back in the murder room."

And he dropped Giles's arm and turned to face him, the big lined face alight with triumph. "*Now* am I hot?"

And the white mist was back, pierced through with pain. And out of the mist Giles heard himself answering, "Yes. Yes. White-hot."

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Rupert—the one she had loved all along. Rupert with his warmth and sweetness and the ducks' tails of red-gold hair that never would lie down flat. Rupert whom their guardian also had chosen to be the favored one. In Giles's mind the white light blazed, the white mist that came more and more frequently nowadays to flood his mind with its terrible brilliance, its terrible pain.

"Am I hot?" asked the old man, still playing the game, the game of Hunt the Murderer, suddenly become only ugly and frightening, to be covered over and forgotten—the game which, unless something were said now, firmly and finally to bring it to an end, would never be covered over, never forgotten . . .

So: "White-hot," said Giles, conceding victory, and the heavy old hand hooked itself into the crook of his arm, and together they went in to tea.

The gardeners had collected their tools and at a discreet distance followed them in, keeping an unobtrusive eye—no use humiliating and antagonizing them—on other couples, other little groups, strolling in to the great barred building ahead. "Strange them two chumming up together," said one gardener to another. "When you think—"

But his companion couldn't think, because he was new here and didn't yet know.

"Well, the young one's the chap that murdered his guardian, old Gemminy—you must have heard of the case? Killed a policeman, too." He mused over it, fishing out his keys as they came to the big doors with their strong wire netting across the glass. "Oddest reason, I suppose, that anyone ever had for killing a policeman."

"What reason?" asked the other.

"What reason? Well, I'll tell you." And big with the wonder of it he brought it out. "All he wanted was to borrow the uniform."

Knowing in advance what Uncle Gem was going to say—that one had within one this seed, passed down through the generations . . . The hot white light which, off and on, had visited him since that hideous night in his long-ago childhood, had taken possession of Giles's whole mind now: brilliant, dazzling—confusing yet clarifying, muffling all emotion, intensifying thought . . .

The plan emerging. Kill a policeman—no, don't kill him immediately, he must not seem to have died until after his uniform has been used and returned to him. Tie him up then—choose a man who knows you well, who will trustingly come with you into the derelict building if you tell him some story of strange goings-on there, who will trustingly turn his back . . .

Wearing his uniform, get to the office—World Cup day, not a soul about, and anyway who notices a uniformed copper going about his ordinary duties? Kill Uncle Gem-

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miny, silence him forever—he who alone knows the seed of madness you carry within you, he who alone knows that you should never marry, never have children . . .

Tie him to his chair; for good reasons you must tie up the policeman and also stab him—an "uncanny" resemblance between the two murders will confuse the issue; and you can throw in a few strange references when you make your telephone calls, cast over it all an air of other-world horror . . .

Telephone Rupert, ask him to hurry; you well know Uncle Gem's mannerisms and for the rest, pretended alarm will disguise your voice. Break the window, keep back a chunk of the glass. Set fire to the desk. A moment before Rupert is due, ring up the police station with wild talk of a mysterious attack, so urgent as to bring them racing across; you know their habits, you've watched them from your window often enough—and there must be several of them, that is the essence of your plot . . .

Now the desk is blazing, the room is filling with smoke, the doors are bolted on the inside. As the pounding on the door begins, inflict the stab wound into Uncle Gem, observe the trickle of blood. Back to the door and stand to one side and wait. They pull back the bolts and pause a moment for the final onslaught. You fling the piece of glass you have preserved from the broken pane. And then, as the door gives and the men surge in and forward, you surge forward with them. Who will observe in that smoke-filled room crowded with blue uniforms that one blue uniform came not through the door but from behind it . . .

Rupert is there, of course; and now you have a bit of extra luck to add to that alibi about having seen him leave the flat. You have noted where the car was parked, you could deduce that he'd rush out in a hurry—you've arranged for that by the telephone call; you know your Rupert. But now, as you stand with your handkerchief up to your face as though against the smoke and the heat, he comes up close to you, shows you the "Helen" note; and you are able to observe that the shoulders of his light jacket are soaked through. So he didn't even wait for his mac. (You must look round when you get back to the flat and see whether or not he even took it with him.)

Meanwhile he reacts to the note as you knew he would. The sergeant won't let you follow him out as you had hoped; so you shout something about the fire brigade and, not waiting for permission, dash off. And from then on—a uniformed bobby, hurrying about some professional duty—slowing down as you get clear of the building, just a man strolling his beat. Back to the derelict factory, get the policeman back into his uniform—easier when he's alive than if he were,

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literally, a dead weight. Finish him off, heave him into the watertank; the longer they take to find him the better, and it will all help to confuse the time of death. The old man's blood on the knife — which you have brought away with you for this very reason—will account for any blood on the uniform . . .

Twenty minutes later you are coming up to the heath, scorching hell-for-leather along the empty roads. Knock up the pub people, ask if they've seen Helen hanging about there waiting for you, ask for change to telephone her at home. From the call box outside make the legitimate call; and then . . .

Five o'clock. The "policeman's" voice ringing up his own station, gibbering with fear, breaking off to say he is being attacked. P.C. Cross: alive and speaking on the telephone at five o'clock when *you* are known to be fifteen miles away . . .

He had reckoned on suspicion fastening perhaps on Rupert; but Helen—that had been horrible. The white light had grown more and more frightening then, blazing day and night inside one's mind with a dazzling confusion, as when one looks into the eye of the sun and sees only blackness. But this had been whiteness, infinitely more terrible—a pain-filled, terror-filled radiance that blotted out all but the pain and the terror of the ensuing days.

They had been very kind, considering what had happened—yes, they had all been kind. They had told him that he would go not to prison but to a place where he might hide himself from the white light inside his head. He had been afraid of that, afraid of the truths that would face him when he was no longer blinded by the light. But they had said that he hadn't been—what they called "responsible"; they had said that when he came to this place he would understand . . .

The gardeners closed the heavy doors behind them with a rattle of keys, herding their charges, sheep-like, to the grazing grounds. "What was the motive? This was hardly just going berserk?"

"The guardian wouldn't let him marry some girl he was smitten with. On account of his heredity, you see. Long family history of insanity. His grandfather one day suddenly went over the edge and polished off the whole lot, except this boy, with an ax. Forgotten the whole thing now—sublimated it, as they say. But the boy . . . They say he remembers it, but how much does he remember? He must know he gets his heredity through the old man; but whether he recognizes—?"

The gardeners stood watching, idly jingling bunched keys as Giles politely passed the brown bread and butter. "Like I was saying, strange them two meeting here and chumming up, after all these years. The young one and his grandfather."

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a *NEW* spy-and-counterspy story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

The 11th in the espionage series about Rand, head of the Department of Concealed Communications—the Double-C Man . . . and in this assignment Rand comes face to face with the infamous Taz, his opposite number, head of the Moscow equivalent of London's DCC. And before it was over, Rand had only a split second to make perhaps the most crucial decision of his life . . .

THE SPY WHO READ LATIN

by EDWARD D. HOCH

BY THE FIRST LIGHT OF THE NEW day the airport at Tirana presented a grubby appearance from above. The patchwork runways had been lengthened to accommodate the regular jet flights from Phnompenh and Shanghai, but otherwise little had been done to improve facilities since the last time Father Howard had passed through. That had been so many years ago, and now he was going home—to Paris and then to London.

But first there was the stop at Tirana, a sleepy little city set among the Albanian hills. It was the capital of the country, but somehow from the airport it reminded him more of the Chinese villages he'd known so well.

He'd expected the ring of alert soldiers that surrounded the big jet as it coasted to a stop. Things were like that in Albania today. Watching them now with their carbines poised, Father Howard reflected on the vagaries of a political climate that could ally two such nations as little Albania and giant Communist China.

Presently a gloomy little man in a long leather coat boarded the aircraft and followed the stewardess quickly down the aisle to his seat. "Your passport, please," he said in thickly accented English.

Father Howard looked up at him, trying to smile. "I'm traveling from Shanghai to Paris," he said. "My passport is not valid in Albania."

"I must ask you to come with me to the Administration Building," the gloomy man said.

"But—"

"Only a formality."

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Father Howard glanced out again at the grim circle of soldiers. Then he sighed, shrugged slightly to his traveling companion, and followed the man in the leather coat down the aisle. The dampness of the Albanian weather cut through him as soon as they stepped outside. "I don't understand any of this."

"You were a missionary priest in China?" the man asked as they crossed the long stretch of patchwork asphalt in the direction of the Administration Building.

Father Howard avoided a shiny puddle. "A long time ago. Things have not been easy for us in recent years."

The man grunted and kept walking. It was then that Father Howard happened to glance back at the waiting plane and saw his battered old carpetbags being lifted from the luggage compartment. "You're taking my baggage!" he gasped, and turned to retrace his steps.

He was striding purposefully toward the big jet when the two bullets hit him in the back of the head, and then he knew no more . . .

The meeting which had brought Rand to the divided city of Berlin was one of the strangest in his career as head of Concealed Communications. He'd hardly believed the first messages when they'd been decoded, and even now as he crossed into East Berlin in an unmarked sedan, he knew he might be heading into a well-baited trap.

It was April in the city, and the misty rains of springtime sent a shiver down his spine. He left the car not far past the checkpoint and went the rest of the way on foot, as instructed.

Finally he reached the corner and stopped to light one of his American cigarettes, wondering vaguely if the sudden pale circle of sun meant that the rain was nearly ended. Berlin had always seemed damper than London to Rand, though he knew it was not the case. Perhaps it was only the mood of the place, with its great gray wall splitting the face of the city's daily existence.

"Mr. Rand, please?" a young boy asked at his elbow. "Follow me, sir."

Rand followed without a word as the tassel-haired youth led him into a shabby structure halfway down the next block. It was a store of sorts, selling tobacco and magazines, in a dank building that still bore visible scars of a war a generation past. The boy motioned to a back room and departed.

Rand stepped carefully through the doorway, trying to still the throbbing of his heart. There was only one man in the room, seated at a low table facing him. "Ah! And you would be Mr. Rand!"

"Taz?" Rand seated himself and studied the face of the man who had asked to meet him here. It was a face that British Intelligence would once have paid a fortune to

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see, the face of a Russian named Taz who headed up the Moscow equivalent of London's Department of Concealed Communications.

It was a thin face, with a pointed jaw and deep blue eyes, and Rand judged the man to be about his own age—in his early forties, perhaps a bit older. He had thin smooth fingers to match the face, and graying hair that swept back from his forehead. When he spoke, his English was accented but quite intelligible.

"I had never thought we would some day meet, Mr. Rand."

"Nor I. You've given me many sleepless nights."

"I have tried," Taz admitted with a slight smile. "We have great admiration for the Double-C Man."

"I had trouble getting here," he told the Russian, because it was true. "They were certain your message was a trap of some sort."

"And yet you came?" Taz asked, his blue eyes flashing in the room's dim light. Rand could imagine the man bent over a cryptogram, studying frequency tables or captured code books.

"I came. I told them I could be killed or kidnaped on the streets of London, if that was what you wanted."

Taz nodded. "You are a wise man—the man I expected you to be. I too had difficulties. There are many in the Kremlin who oppose this meeting."

"And just what is the reason for it?" Rand asked.

"Our interests lie along parallel lines."

"In what way?"

"You know of Father Howard, the English missionary priest who was killed last week in Tirana?"

Rand knew. "He was returning to England after twenty years in China. They took him off the plane and murdered him."

Taz nodded slightly. "Albania is a close ally of China. Someone in Peking ordered his murder after he'd left the country."

Rand decided he could admit to a little knowledge. "The word is he was carrying an important document."

The blue eyes flashed again. "He was carrying a report he had prepared on the inner workings of China's Communist Party hierarchy. It is said to outline the current power struggle and to give an indication of which leaders will probably emerge triumphant. It also contains a great deal on the future course of Sino-Soviet relations, as well as some information of a highly personal nature concerning certain key Chinese leaders."

Rand ground out his cigarette. "You know a great deal. That report would have made interesting reading."

"It still could," Taz said. He picked up a pencil and tapped it nervously against the table. "They removed Father Howard's luggage from the plane, but they did not find the report. You see, he had a

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traveling companion aboard that jet —a former news correspondent named Kane Mander."

Rand nodded. "And Mander landed in Paris with the report intact. We've heard rumors that a man of that name has been offering it for sale."

"Exactly." Taz cleared his throat. "You would be willing to act with us against the common Chinese enemy?"

"That would be a matter for London to decide."

"There is no need for a policy decision," Taz insisted. "We would be willing to share the contents of the report with your government."

"Why do you need me?" Rand asked. "Why can't you just contact Mander and buy it from him?"

"The report was dictated to Father Howard by a highly placed government official shortly before his execution on charges of deviation from party policy. The priest wrote it all down—in Latin."

Rand thought about that for a moment. "Interesting, but I still don't see why you need me."

"The report is for sale in Paris, before the week's end. My government is more than willing to purchase it, but my assignment is to make certain we get the true report and not twenty or thirty pages of Latin prayers." He sighed a little. "And that is the problem. Latin is not taught in Russian schools. There is no one in my department who can read it."

"You must have doctors and lawyers in the government who understand the language."

The Russian shook his head. "Fewer than you'd think, and no one I could trust." He smiled lightly. "These days it would be difficult to find a priest who could read it. Father Howard's skill with the language was somewhat remarkable."

"So you want me to furnish an agent who can read Latin?"

"Exactly."

"You'd trust the British before your own people?"

"I would trust you, since it would be to your government's advantage to have a copy of the report." He paused and began tapping the pencil again. "The question is, do you have an agent *you* could trust?"

"I think so," Rand said. He was remembering a young man named Harry Truce. "Yes."

"Could you have him in Paris the day after tomorrow? Saturday?"

"Yes," Rand said. At this point he had nothing to lose and possibly a great deal to gain.

Taz smiled and held out his hand. "Then we are partners?"

"Of a sort," Rand agreed. "For the present."

He found to his surprise that he liked the man, and he wondered if he could trust him as well.

Harry Truce had been educated at the best universities to enter the diplomatic corps. It was an occupation his father and grandfather had

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followed before him, and it was an honorable one. He'd been born of an English father and an Irish mother, brought up partly in London and partly in an unlikely area of Ireland called Macgillycuddy's Reeks.

Rand never learned at what juncture in Truce's career the diplomatic service had become subordinated to intelligence work, but he did know that young Truce had shown special skills on a number of recent assignments. He was handsome, unmarried, still in his late twenties, with a vigor that Rand secretly admired. And best of all, he could read Latin.

"It would be a privilege to work with Concealed Communications," he told Rand the following morning back in London.

Rand smiled and offered one of his American cigarettes. "Glad to have you aboard, as they say. We need you to fly to Paris and read some Latin. Can you do it?"

"Is that all?"

Rand stared hard at the curl of smoke from his own cigarette. "We'll be working with the Russians," he said quietly. "It may work out and it may not. In any event, we have to be on our toes every minute." He ran quickly over the information Taz had given him in Berlin.

"You believe what he told you?" Harry Truce asked. "About not having anybody in Russia who could read Latin?"

"Not entirely. But I'll play along with him; just to see what he's up to." Rand stood up. "Let's go, Harry. We leave for Paris tonight."

Paris was a sea of glittering April lights as their plane came in for a landing. It was the sort of warm spring night that brought out the lovers along the Champs Elysées, the sort that made Rand forget the dampness of London and Berlin. They had a room at a medium-priced tourist hotel just across the Seine from the Palais de Justice, and it was still a little before ten when they reached it.

Rand phoned the telephone number that Taz had given him, and heard an unfamiliar male voice say, "Kane Mander is staying at number 17, Rue de Varenne. He is expecting you at noon tomorrow."

"What about the money?" Rand asked. "He's not likely to give up anything for free."

"You will be contacted tonight," the voice said, and hung up. Rand sighed and reached for a cigarette.

"What do you think?" Harry Truce asked.

"I don't know," Rand admitted. He began to pace the floor, trying to complete in his mind a jigsaw puzzle with half the pieces missing. He was trusting a Russian, doing a job for him, when every instinct cried out against such trust. Surely Taz would have got the report first and then worried about reading it. Surely the translating of it was a

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minor problem at best. And Father Howard's companion would have no reason for substituting a fake report. "Harry—"

"What?"

"Take a ride over to 17 Rue de Varenne. It's not far from here. See if there's a Kane Mander staying there."

"Right."

"But be careful. Don't make contact with him directly. I'll be waiting for you here, down in the bar."

It was just after midnight when Harry Truce returned. Rand had passed the time lingering over two weak drinks served by an indifferent bartender in the dimly lit lounge, and he was just about to go upstairs to bed when Harry walked through the swinging doors. His left arm was around the waist of a smartly dressed young lady with shoulder-length blonde hair. He was smiling like a college boy on a big date.

The girl's name was Naomi Smith, and she liked to laugh a lot. Rand waited till she went off to the Ladies' Room before fixing Harry with an icy stare. "Where'd you pick her up?"

"I checked out that address. There's a Kane Mander staying on the top floor. But he seemed to be out."

"And the girl?"

Harry Truce smiled slightly. "I didn't think you'd mind. She got there just ahead of me, and she was asking questions about Mander."

Rand grunted. It might mean anything. "Did you ask her about it?"

"I was working up to it."

Naomi Smith came back then, threading her way between tables and sitting down with a bit of a laugh. "Hi! Back again!"

Rand offered a cigarette. "You're American, aren't you?"

"Does it show?"

"Just a little. Do you work in Paris?"

"Here and in London. I'm the European representative of Cage Publications in New York. We have a biweekly news magazine and a chain of newspapers through the midwest. I'm about all they can afford in the way of a foreign correspondent. But Paris is still a great place to work—memories of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, all that."

"It was a long time ago, Miss Smith. There was a war in between."

"Call me Naomi—everyone does. There are so many Smiths, but not many Naomis outside of the Bible." She paused to light another cigarette. "I know there was a war, and now there are all sorts of interesting people around. Did you know that Hemingway covered the liberation of Paris in 1944? I think his generation is still here in spirit."

Rand sipped his drink. There was no point in fencing any longer. "Would one of those interesting people be Kane Mander?"

She looked blank, as if she'd nev-

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er heard the name. "I really don't know."

"You were looking for his apartment."

The big eyes widened further. "Well, I *know* that, but I haven't been able to meet him yet." Another little laugh, as she brushed a vagrant strand of hair from her eyes. "But that's business and I never talk business this late at night."

A sleepy bellboy appeared with a message for Rand. There was a phone call for him in the lobby. He excused himself and went to answer it. It was no real surprise to hear the voice of Taz on the other end.

"You have been out of your room, Mr. Rand."

"Doing a little sightseeing."

"At night? In the bar with Mr. Truce and a young lady?"

Rand smiled slightly. "You don't miss much."

"We have the money for you. For tomorrow."

"Where is it?"

"There is a white envelope near your left hand at this moment. In it is a quantity of Swiss banknotes, enough to meet Mander's asking price. Close the deal at noon and return to your hotel room with the report. I will get in touch with you there."

"All right," Rand said. He hung up and pocketed the white envelope without opening it. He knew one of Taz's men must be close at hand, watching.

One more quick drink and they were seeing Naomi Smith into a taxi. But Harry was in no mood for sleep when they returned to the room. "She's quite a girl, isn't she? Think she could be a Chinese agent?"

Rand shook his head. "Her eyes don't slant."

"No, really! Why else would she be looking for Mander?"

"She's heard about the report and wants to buy it for her magazine."

Rand was busy counting the Swiss banknotes. They came to almost £35,000—about $100,000. It was a great deal of money for Taz to entrust to him.

Saturday was sunny, and warmer than the previous day. When they reached the address on the Rue de Varenne, the place seemed quiet and respectable, with only a few children playing a sidewalk game in front. The time was exactly noon when they walked through the doorway of Kane Mander's apartment.

He was a strange-looking man, with a completely bald head and tiny eyes barely visible benath layers of fat. His English was poor, and he suggested at the outset that they converse in French. "Whom do you represent?" he asked.

Rand patted the thick envelope of banknotes. "A combine of interested buyers."

"I will not sell to the Russians. The Communists were responsible for Father Howard's death."

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"We're sorry about Father Howard," Rand told the bald man. "It must have been hard on you."

"I watched them take him off the plane. I think I knew they were after the report, and he must have, too. It was like a silent movie, because our propellers were still running and I couldn't even hear the sound of the shots. I just saw him topple, and then they carried him away."

Rand gestured toward Harry Truce. "This man will inspect the report. He reads Latin."

"You haven't yet told me whom you represent."

Rand handed over some routine credentials. "British Intelligence. To be exact, the Department of Concealed Communications."

He was beginning to understand at least a part of Taz's scheming. The man would not have dealt with a Russian. Still, he felt he was being loyal to Father Howard's memory. The report would be delivered where it would do the most good.

"All right," Kane Mander decided. "And the money?"

Rand handed it over. "You didn't mention an amount."

"I told them on the telephone—is it all here?"

"You can count it while my friend reads the report."

Mander nodded his bald head and disappeared into the bathroom. He returned almost at once with a sheaf of handwritten pages. Rand guessed there must be 25 or 30 in all, and he could see only that the unfamiliar words had been written in a strong, priestly hand.

"There's a lot to it," Harry said with a frown.

"Just skim through it. Make sure of what we're getting."

Mander finished his money-counting first. "The amount is correct," he announced, slapping down the last of the banknotes.

"You'll be leaving Paris now?"

"After I get some sleep. In a day or so."

Harry Truce finished skimming the last of the sheets. "It's hard to tell, but it looks all right to me. They're certainly not Latin prayers."

"Let's go," Rand decided. There was nothing more to be accomplished here. "It was a pleasure dealing with you, Mr. Mander."

"My pleasure, certainly. And Father Howard would have been pleased."

"You going to use the money for a fancy gravestone?" Rand asked.

Mander reddened slightly. "He was my friend. He would have wanted it this way."

"Sure. Of course."

In another moment they were back on the quiet street.

"That was easy," Harry said.

"Easy," Rand agreed.

Back at the hotel they waited for the Russian's call. It came in less than an hour. "You have it, Mr. Rand?"

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"I have it."

"Authentic?"

"Authentic. Verified."

"I assume you will copy it before delivering the original to me."

Rand glanced over at the desk where Harry had set up a miniature camera and was already photographing the pages. "Naturally. When do I deliver the original?"

"I cannot come there myself in daylight. A Chinese agent arrived in Paris two days ago, and he may be watching your hotel." Taz hesitated and then said, "Tonight, just after dark. Be at the Eiffel Tower when they turn on the lights. Then begin walking due south until I stop you."

"All right," Rand said, and hung up. He hoped the phone was safe.

"We all set?" Harry asked.

"I am. How about you?" Rand walked over to the table and glanced down at the sheet of paper positioned under the camera. The Latin script covered the page from top to bottom, with the number 23 at the top right corner in a slightly darker ink. "How many more pages?"

"There are twenty-seven pages altogether. I'm almost finished."

"Good. We'll send the film to London by courier. Give it to me when you finish." He walked over to the window and stared down at the river. It was muddy and winding, like the Thames. Like all rivers.

"When do we go back?" Harry asked.

"Tonight, on the late flight. But I don't want to take a chance carrying this film around. I'll pass it to our man at the Embassy and then give the original to Taz. You get us some plane tickets and meet me at the airport."

Harry Truce grunted. "There's something I want to do first."

"What's that?"

"It's just an idea I have. I'd like to check it out."

"They don't pay us to be heroes," Rand reminded him. "Just to do a job. Pick up the tickets and meet me at the airport."

After Harry left, Rand checked his suitcase and removed the flat automatic pistol which he always carried in an inner compartment. He didn't particularly like the weight of it under his arm, but the meeting with Taz presented too many unanswered questions.

The Russian had wanted someone who could read Latin. He'd obviously wanted the deal handled by the British rather than the Russians. Did he want something else, too? Rand was inclined to trust him, but he took the gun anyway.

Back in the sunshine, walking across the nearly deserted Rue de la Cité, where the rear view of Notre Dame Cathedral was almost as spectacular as the front, he decided to deliver the film to the courier before he did anything else. It took him only ten minutes to complete that mission, and as he left the drop point near the Embassy, he heard

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someone call his name. "Mr. Rand!"

He turned and saw a breathless Naomi Smith running down the sidewalk toward him. "Miss Smith. How are you today?"

"Not very good," she admitted. "What are you and Harry trying to pull with Kane Mander?"

"Do we have to be pulling anything?"

"My boss talked to Mander by trans-Atlantic phone three days ago. He agreed to see me and listen to my offer before doing anything with the report. I just reached him and he told me he'd sold it to you."

Rand smiled slightly. "We weren't completely honest with each other last evening, were we?"

"Mr. Rand, we're willing to go as high as fifty thousand dollars for first publication rights to Father Howard's report."

"It's not mine to sell, Miss Smith."

"Could we talk to your superiors?"

"I'm sorry. It would do no good."

She seemed almost ready to stamp her foot in frustration. "This could cost me my job!"

"There's nothing I can do," he said, and left her standing alone on the sidewalk.

He'd walked another few blocks when he saw the crowd in the street. It was the direction Naomi Smith had come from—back toward the apartment on the Rue de Varenne. Rand would have passed by without a second thought except that something drew him to the spot.

He pushed through the crowd, past the little ambulance with its flashing light, and saw the body on the pavement. It was Harry Truce.

"What happened?" he asked a bystander.

"Accident—hit and run."

"Is he dead?"

The Frenchman nodded. "He's dead. These Englishmen never look the right way when they're crossing."

"I saw the whole thing," a woman said. She was fat and sweating. "He ran right at the car and it hit him."

Rand's mouth was very dry. "Was there a woman driving?"

The fat woman bumped against him. "What does that mean? You think only women run down pedestrians in the street? You Englishmen are all alike, all—"

He walked away, pushing back through the crowd, avoiding the uniformed policeman who was taking statements. There was nothing he could do for Harry Truce. Perhaps he had done too much already.

It was a dirty business at best, and the Paris assignment with Taz was no different from all the rest of it. The Russian had somehow double-crossed him, in a manner he still did not understand, and now Harry Truce was dead. But the original of Father Howard's report was still in his breast pocket. They hadn't got it from Harry, if that was what they'd been after.

He took a taxi to the Palais de

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Chaillot, across the river from the Eiffel Tower, and found a public restroom. He locked himself in the little cubicle and examined the original report once more. If there was any secret communication in it, the Latin words effectively screened it. He looked through the 27 pages one at a time, finding nothing. And yet there was something that bothered him, something not quite right.

In a few hours the report would be in Taz's hands. Would he have killed Harry just to get it a little bit sooner? Or had Harry died because of some discovery he'd made about the whole affair and Taz's part in it?

He wondered what Harry would have done with the report if the choice had been his. Give it to Taz as promised? More likely, he'd have let Naomi Smith use it for her magazine. Sometimes wars really were lost by a general's hangover, or won by the smile of a pretty girl.

Rand barely glanced at the Eiffel Tower as he crossed the bridge and walked among the strollers and lovers and tourists with their cameras. Already it was dusk, and soon the lights would come on. Taz would be waiting—to kill him too?

Rand felt the gun heavy beneath his arm. No one could live on trust forever, not Rand or the world. He would have to shoot first, if Taz made the slightest suspicious move.

Presently he saw the man, sitting on one of the benches in a shabby workingman's costume. The Russian pretended not to notice him as Rand walked on past, waiting for the spotlights to strike out at the Tower when darkness fell. Finally the lights came on. Rand turned to retrace his steps, and saw the Russian rise to greet him.

He was twenty feet away when Taz's hand emerged from his pocket, holding a small pistol that was almost invisible in the gloom. Rand dropped to the pavement, clawing at his own weapon. But then in an instant he saw the third figure behind him. It was Kane Mander, and he too had a gun.

Taz shouted something in Russian as Mander fired two wild shots. Then Rand rolled over, prayed he was making the right choice, and shot Kane Mander through the forehead.

They held their final meetng in a private room at Orly Airport, just before midnight that evening. It was very different from the hour they'd spent in Berlin together. Taz and his party were departing for East Berlin, while Rand was on his way back to London. The report of Father Howard had already changed hands.

"Perhaps you saved my life," Taz said.

"He was blinded by the lights," Rand pointed out. "It gave me a split second to decide."

"But how did you know it was Kane Mander who killed your friend, and not me?"

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Rand leaned back in his chair, tired of it all, wondering what awaited him back in London. There'd be formalities with the Paris police, reports to be completed. "It wasn't Kane Mander, that's the point. It was the Red Chinese agent who arrived a few days ago. The real Mander is probably at the bottome of the Seine."

"But how did you know?"

"The same way Harry Truce knew, except that I was a bit slower catching on. When we met the supposed Kane Mander, he described the killing of Father Howard and mentioned the noise of the plane's propellers. But the plane was a jet, and a jet has no propellers—which he certainly would have known if he'd made the trip with Father Howard. If he didn't make the trip, then he wasn't the real Kane Mander—simple as that.

"The girl Naomi Smith gave me a bit of verification when she said her publisher had phoned Mander, that he'd agreed to see her and listen to her offer before closing a deal with anyone else. Again this appeared to be the action of an impersonator, a false Kane Mander."

"But why sell you the report if he was a Chinese agent?" Taz argued.

"Two reasons—for the money, mainly, but also to have a try at killing us both. He must have had someone on my tail all day, waiting for me to make contact with you. If we could both be killed, and it could look as if we had shot each other—"

"He knew we were working together?"

"He knew, or guessed. Don't they always suspect you Russians of such things with the West?"

"But the report was truly valuable—" Taz was still puzzled.

"Not in the form he supplied it to me today. We received Father Howard's fifteen-page introduction and twelve-page conclusion. The meat of the report, running to thirty-five more pages, was removed by the false Mander before he delivered it. Harry Truce only skimmed through it, and failed to realize that such a large chunk was missing. But there was a clue to it—the clue that must have sent Harry to his death."

"What clue?"

"The page numbers were in a darker ink, indicating they were written at a different time from the text, and they were in Arabic numerals—I remember seeing the number 23 while Harry was photographing the pages. Would Father Howard have numbered a Latin manuscript in Arabic numerals, in other than Roman numerals? Possible, but unlikely. Either the original manuscript was unnumbered, or else the Chinese agent merely cut off the tops of the pages and renumbered them. If the manuscript pages were renumbered, the implication was that something had been removed. Harry must have thought of that, along with Man-

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der's mistake about the plane's propellers, and gone back to confront him—or to search for the missing pages."

"And was killed."

Rand nodded. "And was killed. He saw the man who called himself Mander leaving in a car and tried to stop him. He was run down for his trouble. I knew the accident took place near the apartment, but I didn't connect Mander with it till I saw him at the Tower tonight."

"Surely our people in Moscow and London would have discovered the missing pages of manuscript."

"Yes, and accused each other of stealing them. Neither of us would have been alive to say differently."

Taz's voice was barely a whisper. Overhead they could hear the roar of an incoming jet. "It is my turn to play detective. How did you know there were thirty-five missing pages?"

"I went back to Mander's apartment tonight and found them hidden under the rug."

"I must have them," said Taz.

Rand took a thick envelope from his pocket. "They're yours. I've already photographed them."

The Russian smiled slightly. "Thank you." Then, "Did you really think I would have killed you tonight?"

"For a moment I wasn't sure," Rand admitted. "You surely wanted more than just a spy who could read Latin. You *must* have people in Moscow—"

"I wanted more."

"Me?"

Taz eyed him for a moment. "But not dead. Alive—as a defector. I was to offer you a great deal of money."

"You didn't mention it earlier."

"No. I realized from the moment I saw you that you were a different sort of man."

"Aren't we both?" Rand got to his feet. "I have a plane to catch."

Taz nodded. "What about the girl?"

"I'll give her a story—something with lots of cloaks and daggers."

"But not the truth?"

"There are so many truths," Rand said. "We can share one of them with her—the one about a brave and foolish young man named Harry Truce."

Rand walked with Taz to the door, shook hands quickly, and hurried toward his plane. He did not look back.

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A THEME FOR HYACINTH

by JULIAN SYMONS

HAPPINESS, ROBIN EDGLEY thought as he felt the sun on his chest and stomach and legs, seeping through the epidermis to irradiate the blood and sinew and, yes, heart beneath; it is by pure chance that I have discovered happiness for the first time in my life. If Felix had not been laid low by influenza and been delayed leaving England for a week, Gerda would never have spoken to me and this would have been simply another holiday Instead, it was a revelation to himself of his inmost nature.

Happiness, happiness! It was a golden body that you held in your hands on a green island beside a blue sea, but it was also—to move beyond that rather seaside-posterish conception—the inward reassurance given by his love for Gerda, the feeling of merging his identity with that of another human being, something that went beyond the possibilities of words.

Pleasurable warmth was turning into heat. Perhaps his front had been cooked sufficiently. He removed the bandage from his eyes, glanced round, and saw that he shared the terrace beside the sea with half a dozen old men and women; he turned onto his stomach and picked up the poetry anthology he had been reading. One poem, *Le Monocle de Mon Oncle* by Wallace Stevens, fascinated him. It was a middle-aged man's reflections on love:

In the high west there burns a
furious star.

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It is for fiery boys that star was set
And for sweet-smelling virgins close to them.
The measure of the intensity of love
Is measure, also, of the verve of earth.

True, he thought. He felt in himself a sharpening of the senses, a deepened awareness of everything about him. But the next verse provoked disagreement.

When amorists grow bald, then armours shrink
Into the compass and curriculum
Of introspective exiles lecturing.
It is a theme for Hyacinth alone.

No, no, he cried silently. His head was silvered and not bald, but the point was that love between a mature man and a young woman could contain everything felt by those "fiery boys"—and more, much more. Was the poem not proved untrue by almost the first words Gerda had spoken to him?

He was wondering at that time, three days ago, why he had ever come. He had succumbed to the boyish eagerness of his cousin Felix, and had regretted it almost immediately. Looking sideways at him out of those dark eyes that were absurdly long-lashed for a man's, Felix had said he was going away and asked why Nunky—which was his name for Robin, although they were not blood relations—didn't come too.

"I'm fed up with bloody agents, bloody producers, bloody theater. Getting out of it, Nunky, going to look for the sun. Let them bloody ring my flat and not find me, they'll be keener when I come back. Since you're a man of leisure, why not make it a twosome?" Where was he going? He didn't know but it turned out to be Yugoslavia, the Adriatic coast, Dubrovnik. "Boiling hot, wonderful swimming, fishing, and cheap. Not that that matters to you, but it does to me. And we might find a couple of birds. If you're so inclined."

Again that sideways glance from the fine eyes that—he could admit it frankly now—always disturbed him. The disturbance came from the doubts about himself raised by such glances and by the impulse he felt at times to put an arm round the young man's shoulders, to push him playfully over onto a sofa when they had an argument. It was five years since Mary's death and he had neither remarried nor even engaged in a love affair since then. Was there something wrong with him?

Thinking of his own fastidiousness, of the care he took about the color and fit of clothes, of his liking for picking up nice little pieces of bric-a-brac and of putting them in just the right spot in his flat, he wondered whether he could possibly be (a word he disliked using, disliked even the thought of) queer? Or was it just that the rackety life Felix lived fascinated him, shifting quarterly from flat to flat, often out of work and sometimes tremendously

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hard up? Occasionally Robin had lent him small sums of money which had always been returned, but he had worried even about these. Was he trying to buy affection?

He could admit all this now, since Gerda had proved that there was nothing queer about him.

So much for Felix, who had done him the best turn of his life by contracting influenza and by telephoning, in a woebegone voice about which there was as always a hint of self-mockery, to say that he would come out as soon as he felt better. But these had not been Robin's thoughts as he took a hot bath, changed into a dashing maroon dinner jacket, and sat down to dinner alone on that first night in the hotel. Afterward he stood on the terrace leaning on his silver-headed malacca cane, and stared gloomily at the lights of the old city. He felt a touch on his arm.

"You will forgive me if I speak to you," the girl said. "But I could not help looking at you in the restaurant. You were the most attractive man in the room." She paused and made a careful amendment. "That is not quite right. I should have said the most *interesting* man."

That made it easier for him to say, "Thank you."

"My name is Gerda."

"Robin Edgley." She was young, blonde, beautiful. He felt a moment's panic. "Shall we sit down? would you like a drink?"

When they were sitting in chairs that overlooked the bay, drinks by their sides, he felt a little more comfortable. "You took my breath away. Do you often say that kind of thing to a strange man?"

"Never before. Please believe me." She spoke gravely, and he did believe her. She was not, he now saw, quite the dazzling beauty he had thought. Her hair was silky and her features fine, but the large mouth turned down sulkily at the corners and her blue eyes were very wide apart under their thick blonde brows. The eyes looked cold, but a kind of warmth came from her, almost as if some fire burned within her. Her English was perfect, but accented.

He asked if she was German and she nodded. "You're a very unusual girl."

"Don't talk like that. As if you were my uncle." She spoke sharply. "We are the same age, you and I."

"What nonsense. I might be your uncle. I am forty-five." In fact, he was four years older.

"I did not mean in that way. We feel the same emotions. When you look at this landscape what do you feel?"

He looked into gathering darkness and she said impatiently, "Not now. When you came."

"Romantic, I suppose."

"And subtle."

"Yes, romantic in a subtle way," he said, although he had not felt this at all.

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"Young men do not feel such things. They bore me." Without taking breath she asked, "Shall we go for a walk?"

They walked in the Gradac Park, among old cypress and pine trees, above the sea. He found himself talking with unusual freedom, telling her that he had been a partner in a small firm manufacturing a new kind of air vent for kitchens, and that he had retired from it a couple of years ago. He tried to explain something of his feeling.

"Suddenly it seemed ridiculous, going in to an office every day. I thought, is this all I'm going to do with my life? Of course when Mary was alive it was different, but she died five years ago."

"Mary?"

"My wife. I forgot you didn't know her. Isn't that silly?"

"Nothing about you is silly. Yes, there is one thing." She pointed to the stick. "Why use that? It is for lame men."

"Ah, but you don't realize—" With a twist and a flourish he drew the sword from its sheath. "If I am attacked."

"I think it is foolish." In her precise English it sounded very definite. "What else have you found in life?"

"I don't know. Places—all the places I haven't seen. Poetry—I always liked reading poetry. Meeting people, not just English people."

"Have you found what you hoped?"

"I don't know. Enough to be glad that I gave up business."

But as he spoke it seemed to him that something was terribly missing. He asked what she did, and she laughed deep in her throat.

"You will see." She would say nothing more. On the way back he was very conscious of her physical presence at his side. There was something animal, assured yet stealthy, about the movements of her body. Once he touched her arm and felt an almost irresistible desire to grip her shoulders and turn her to him. Then the moment was over and they were walking along again.

In the hotel lobby he was uncertain whether to suggest a drink in his room. Then that moment also passed. She said good night and was walking away, the golden hair like a cap at the back of her head.

On the following morning he woke in excellent spirits. He ate breakfast on the balcony outside his room and watched tourists going off in coaches to Mostar, the bay of Kotor, and on the Grand Tour of Montenegro. The holiday makers, mostly brawny Germans and unbecomingly sunburned English, stood about chatting until they were shepherded by energetic guides into the coaches. The voices of the guides rang out like those of schoolteachers gathering children to cross the road.

"Hurry, please. We are already five minutes late."

There was something familiar

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about the precision of the tone even as it floated up to him, and he identified her in a blue and white sleeveless dress, with a dark-blue peaked cap on the side of her head. She looked up, saw him, touched her fingers to her lips, then jumped into the coach and was gone.

He was in the sun lounge when the travelers returned in the early evening. He assured himself that he was not waiting for her, but the thrill that went through his body at sight of her golden hair under the peaked cap was something he had not felt for years.

She came up to him at once. Beads of moisture marked her upper lip. He asked if she wanted a drink. She shook her head. "I am not presentable. Those coaches are hot. But in ten minutes I should like a large, *large* gin and tonic."

He had it waiting for her in the bar. "So you're a guide."

"Only for a few days, with this one party. On Sunday my husband comes out. Then we shall be on holiday." Her petulant mouth turned down. "His name is Porter, so that I am Gerda Porter. It sounds ridiculous. He is a travel agent. I thought it would be amusing to play the part of a guide, for just one party, so he arranged it."

"He sounds nice."

"Don't let us talk about him. Shall I come to your room now or after dinner?" He stared at her. "I have shocked you? You do not like women to be frank?"

He went on staring and she looked back with one thick eyebrow raised, half smiling. "Now," he said and then added, with what he felt at the time to be wretched pusillanimity, "In separate lifts. We must be careful."

They went up in separate elevators. They did not come down to dinner.

Two days later her party went home. He watched her with them, talking to the men who asked about playing at the casino where only foreign currency was permitted and about making special trips to see what they called "something of the way people really live here" (as though the Yugoslavs were another species), and with the women who engaged her in endless chats about what they could buy and what they could take home.

She handled all their queries with efficiency, courtesy and an apparently endless patience. After seeing them off at the airport she came back and sat in a chair beside him.

"I'm glad that's over. What a boring lot!"

"You handled them perfectly."

"Why not? I used to be a travel courier. I was enjoying it. But after meeting you—" She left the sentence unfinished. "We have three days."

"Three days?"

"Before my husband arrives." Her eyes were like blue marbles.

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That day they explored Dubrovnik, intoxicated by the pleasure of being in a city sacred to walkers. They wandered from side to side of the Placa looking in the windows of shops that all seemed to sell the same goods, priced head scarfs and rugs in the Gundulic Square market, ate unidentifiable fish at a little restaurant in Ul Siroka, made a circuit of the ramparts. After lunch they drank coffee on the terrace of the Gradska Kafana by the harbor. Then they hired a motorboat with surprising ease, and in the motorboat discovered the island.

The Dalmatian coast is full of islands, including Lokrum, less than half a mile from the walled city, which appears to be covered with pine woods but, in fact, contains a park filled with subtropical vegetation and twenty small coves for bathers. Lokrum is a "trippers' haunt," but a little beyond it there are a dozen tiny islands, no more than a few hundred yards long, some almost pure rock, others covered by shrubs and dwarf trees, and with natural landing places.

It was one of these that they found, rowing in the last few yards and pulling up the boat into a tiny bay. They took off their clothes, swam naked in the clear blue water, then walked back a few yards from the beach and made love on the grass. The walls of Dubrovnik were visible less than a mile away, yet they were completely alone. This is unreal, he told himself; it has nothing to do with any life I have ever known. These thoughts were interrupted by Gerda.

"Look at me! I sweat like a pig." There was moisture on her brow and on her body. "Disgusting. Not like you—your body is dry."

"Dry with old age."

"Don't talk like that, it's stupid. My husband is an old man."

"Gerda—"

"And I do not wish you to call me Gerda, it is the name he uses. I tell you my secret name—it is Hella. You call me Hel."

"Hel, you have shown me heaven," he said inanely. "Does he look like me, your husband?"

She snorted with laughter. "You'll see." With her face half buried in grass she told him about her life. Her parents had escaped from East to West Germany, and she had gone from West Germany to England, where she worked as an *au pair* girl. She had no intention of remaining with the family, but she could not get a job without a labor permit. So she forged one and was engaged as a courier by Porter Travel, Ltd.

"And then you married the boss." He said it lightly, to hide the fact that her calm talk of forgery had shocked him.

"Yes."

"You say he is—my age. Did he attract you?"

"Yes, but that was not important. He found out that my permit was

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no good, so it was the only thing to do. When I see something must be done I do it."

"You're ruthless."

"When it is necessary. But if I had known what it would be like—" Again she did not finish the sentence, but stared at him with her brilliant marble eyes. Then she turned and ran down again to the sea. He got up and followed her.

It was on the island, the following day, that he told her he loved her. This was something he had not said to any woman, except to Mary in the early days of their marriage. She made no reply. "But you don't love me, Hel, do you?"

"I am not sure. Anyway it does not matter. It is Friday. On Sunday afternoon my husband will arrive."

"Felix too. I've had a cable." He had told her about Felix.

"When he is here it will be all over."

"I want to marry you." He had not known that he was going to say these words, but as soon as they were uttered he knew them to be true. She remained silent. "Did you hear me?"

"I heard you. It is impossible."

"Why?"

"My husband is a Catholic. He would not divorce me."

"If you left him we could live together." He was astonished to hear himself suggest it.

"He would bring a law case, drag you through the Courts. Would you like that, respectable Robin? There is only one way we could be together."

"How?"

"If he were dead."

He had closed his eyes. Now he opened them. She had a towel wrapped round her, and she was leaning on one arm looking at him. He realized at once that she meant they should kill her husband in some way. He was not even surprised, for he understood by now the total ruthlessness of her character. But he was a conventional man, and conventional words accurately expressed his reaction. "You must be mad."

She made no reply, but began to dress. They went down to the boat in silence. Then she put her arms round him. "I love you, Robin, but how can I permit myself to do so? What would be the use?"

"If you loved me you wouldn't talk like that."

"I love like a German. If I want something I try to get it. If I cannot get it I do without and don't complain. You do not have the courage to help me, so we have till Sunday. We can enjoy that much."

But Robin did not enjoy it, or not in the same way. The sensual grip she exerted on him was very powerful. He had always thought of himself as a less than average sensual man, for he had never experienced with Mary anything like the feelings that Gerda inspired in him. The intensity of his actions and reactions during lovemaking fright-

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ened him, just as in a different way he was frightened by the feeling that he existed as an instrument for her satisfaction. He told himself that he loved her, but did he feel anything more than a sexual itch? Lines from another poem came into his head:

But at my back from time to time I hear
The sound of horns and motors which shall bring
Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring.

To think of himself as apeneck Sweeney, the image of mindless sensuality, distressed and worried him. But overriding such feelings was the longing he felt for her that made another part of himself say, "This is the first happiness you have had in your long dreary life. Are you going to throw it away?"

He held out until Sunday morning. On Saturday they went to the island but it was not a success, and on Sunday morning neither of them suggested a visit. When they found that two places were vacant on a coach expedition to Cilipi, a few miles away, to see the peasants come to church in local costume, they got in.

The scene as they approached was farcical. Dozens of coaches were drawn up along the roadside. They parked half a mile from the church square. When they reached it, the place was packed with camera-carrying tourists, taking shots of everything in sight. A few locals moved in and out of the throng, the women wearing white nunlike coifs, embroidered blouses, and long black skirts. Tourists snapped cameras within inches of their faces, asked them to hold still, climbed onto cars to get angled shots. A scrawny American with white knees showing below baggy shorts aimed his camera at a fezzed village elder who sat placidly smoking a long clay pipe.

"Excuse it, please." The American pushed Robin and Gerda aside, dropped to one knee, then suddenly flung himself flat onto the ground and squinted up at the Cilipian who stared into the distance with imperturbable dignity. Robin looked at Gerda. They both burst out laughing, then walked out of the square and the village down a rough path that led through scrub to nowhere.

"You do not have your cane." He had left it in his room ever since that first evening. He said curtly she had been right, he did not need it. She glanced at him, said nothing.

"Did you ever see anything so awful as those tourists? The Yugoslavs must think we're all barbarians."

"But I am a barbarian. You think so." Her words were like an accusation.

She leaned against a rock. "You are afraid of everything. If I said to you take me into that field, make love to me, would you do it?"

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"Hel, it wouldn't be—" Two coiffed women came up the stony path. *"Dobar dan,"* he said.

"Dobar dan." They passed on.

She said ironically, as he stumbled on a rock, "You need your cane. I think you should carry it." She wore dark glasses, but he knew that behind them her blue eyes would be cold. He could not bear the thought of losing her. "Hel, tell me what you want."

"It must be what *we* want."

"What we want." When he put his hand on her arm it seemed to burn him.

She told him in her precise English, speaking in a rapid low voice. She used sleeping tablets and would put two of them into her husband's coffee one day after lunch. Robin would take him out in the boat. In half an hour her husband would be asleep. Near the island the boat would overturn and the sleeping man would drown. Robin was a strong swimmer, he could easily reach the island. There he would wait until a boat saw him, or an expedition came looking for them from Dubrovnik.

"It would be murder."

"He would know nothing."

"I should be suspected. People have seen us together."

"Do you think the Yugoslav police will trouble about that? They are peasants, like the people here. It is obviously an accident. Probably they do not find the body. And if they do—" The sulky mouth curved upward in a smile. "I will tell you something. He cannot swim."

"La Belle Dame sans Merci," he said.

"What is that?"

"A poem. It means you are ruthless. And I am in thrall to you."

"I do not understand."

"Yes. It means that I say yes."

She did not reply, did not take off the dark glasses, merely looked at him and nodded. Then she took his hand and led him into the field. The pleasure that followed was intense, and almost painful.

"You're looking uncommonly fit, Nunky," Felix said. "A fine bronzed figure of an Englishman. You bear every sign of not having missed me. Discovered any female talent?"

"Don't be absurd."

"Most of them look over the age of consent to me."

"I have been out once or twice with Mrs. Porter. Her husband was on your plane. They're staying at this hotel."

"Little fat chap—I remember him meeting her. A blonde piece, a bit too Nordic for me."

"She is of German origin," he said with what he knew to be ridiculous stiffness.

Felix looked at him and whistled. "You sound as if you've fallen for the fair Nordic lady. I shall have to look after you, Nunky, I can see that."

He went out with Felix in the

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boat that afternoon, and landed on the island. They both swam and then Felix put on his skindiving equipment and disappeared for three-quarters of an hour while Robin lay on the beach and thought about Hel. Her absence ached in him like a tooth, and when Felix reappeared and talked enthusiastically about the marvelous clarity of the water so that he could see fish swimming fifty feet below him, and said it would be quite easy to swim from the island to Dubrovnik, he heard himself becoming unreasonably snappish.

The old relationship with Felix, in which he had responded eagerly to his young cousin's coquettish facetiousness, had been replaced by a feeling of irritation. He no longer wished to be called Nunky and felt no inclination to indulge in pseudo-boyish horseplay. When the young man took out a mirror and began carefully to comb his hair he felt a faint stirring of distaste.

Closing his eyes he immediately saw Hel in bed with her fat stumpy husband, forced to accept his love-making or—worse still—welcoming it. He got up, walked to the water's edge, began to throw stones into the sea. Felix watched him with a smiling mouth and inquisitive eyes.

She introduced him to Porter that evening. Good Heavens, Robin thought as he looked at the squat paunchy little man who shook hands with him, he's *old!* However did she bring herself to marry him? It was a shock to remember that Porter was no more than two or three years older than himself, but then there was the difference between them of a man who had kept his body in trim and one who had let it go to seed.

"Hear you've been squiring Gerda around, Mr. Edgley. I appreciate that. Not that she's had much spare time, with this crazy idea she had of being guide to one of my parties. Had to indulge her—I'm an indulgent man, isn't that so, my dear?" He patted her hand.

"From what I saw she was a most efficient guide."

"Should be. Used to do it for a living, now it's for fun. I tell you what I'd like, Robin—don't mind if I call you that, I know Gerda does—what I'd like is for you and your friend to be my guests this evening. Let's go and paint this little old Communist town red."

"Norman knows all the best places," Gerda said without smiling.

"I should, my dear, I should. The food at this place is—well, it's hotel food and that's all you can say for it. But I know a little place where—well, you leave it to me." He winked one eye.

It was a terrible evening. They ate a special Montenegrin dinner which began with smoked ham, followed by red mullet and *raznici,* which proved to be a brother to *kebab,* meat grilled on a skewer.

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The restaurant was set in a garden, just outside the city walls.

Porter—or as he insisted on being called, Norman—talked Serbo-Croat to waiters who responded in English. They drank slivovitz to begin with, continued with several bottles of full red Yugoslav wine, and ended with more slivovitz. Norman sent back one bottle of slivovitz with what sounded like a flow of objectionable remarks in Serbo-Croat. When the waiter shrugged and brought a bottle of another make he said triumphantly, "You see. You have to know to get the right stuff."

There was a band, and all three of them danced with Gerda. When Robin moved round, feeling the hard warmth of her body beneath his hand, he found the sensation almost intolerable. "You see what he is like," she said. "An old man. Disgusting."

"Not much older than I am."

"Do not be stupid. It is not at all the same."

"Hel, I have to see you, talk to you."

"We cannot," she said crisply. "This I told you."

"I just have to see you alone."

"Impossible. Besides, what is there to talk about? Today is Sunday. Tomorrow after lunch."

The dance was almost finished before he said, "Yes."

Felix danced with Gerda, holding her as lightly as possible, his arched nostrils slightly distended, his head held high in the manner of a horse ready to shy at what he may meet round the next corner. They seemed to exchange little conversation. Norman drank another glass of slivovitz, belched slightly.

"After this I want you to be my guests at the casino."

"Very kind of you, but—" Robin protested.

"Won't take but for an answer. Beautiful, isn't she?"

An alarming remark. Robin did not know what to say. "Very charming."

"Some men would be jealous. Not me. I like it, like her to have other friends. I understand." He drummed with his fingers on the table. Robin realized that his host was drunk. "I've never regretted anything—want you to know that. No regrets, no heel taps. Loveliest girl I ever saw, married her. What d'you say to that?"

Robin had no desire to say anything to it. When Gerda and Felix came back, Porter rose a little unsteadily. "May I have the pleasure?"

She said nothing, but moved into his arms. Felix seemed about to speak, then did not. Robin watched them dancing. Porter's arm was on her bare back, and he seemed to be talking continuously.

Felix, like a man who has come to a decision, said, "Nunky."

Irritation spilled over. "Once and for all, will you please understand that I do not want to be called by that ridiculous name!"

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"Sorry."

There was a disturbance among the dancers. Gerda emerged from it, half supporting her husband. Porter sat down heavily, closed his eyes, and opened them again. He insisted they must all go on to the casino, but with the headwaiter's help they got a taxi and returned to the hotel. During the taxi ride Porter began to snore. At the hotel Felix and Robin each took an arm to get him into the elevator. In the bedroom Gerda removed his jacket and waved them away.

"I can put him to bed, thank you. I have done it before."

Alone in his room Robin looked at himself in the glass. Below the abundant white hair his face was youthful. Calves and thighs were slightly withered but his body was supple, his stomach flat.

"With this body I thee worship," he said aloud. He picked up the malacca walking stick, drew the sword from it, made a few passes at an imaginary enemy. Perhaps he too was a little drunk, he thought as he carried on a dialogue with himself while staring into the glass.

Robin Edgley, he said, retired director of a firm manufacturing fan ventilators, you are reaching out for happiness, and there is only one way to obtain it. Make up your mind to that. But what you are about to do is crazy, another part of himself said; you are thinking of forever but she is thinking of today and tomorrow and perhaps next year. And not only is it crazy but it is wrong, opposed to all the instincts you have lived by since youth. How can you imagine that after doing wrong you will be happy? What does that matter, the first voice said, when I have been given a glimpse of eternity . . .

It was a long time before he fell asleep, and when he slept he dreamed. He was in the sea and Porter was with him, the boat overturned; he was holding Porter under the water, but instead of submitting quietly the man flailed and twisted like a fish. Then Robin gripped a throat which was smooth, young, and white instead of the swollen wrinkled column he was expecting, and it was Hel's throat he was squeezing, her face that was gaspingly lifted to his own before he too started to gasp and thrash about, conscious that life was being pressed out of him—

He woke with the sheet twisted round his body. The dream disturbed him. There was some element in it that he could not recall; something had happened that his conscious mind refused to register. He looked at his watch and saw that it was only two o'clock. He did not sleep again until four . . .

In the morning Porter looked pale but cheerful. At eleven o'clock he was drinking a champagne cocktail on the terrace. "Hear you put me to bed last night, old man, very nice of you. Sort of thing that's lia-

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ble to happen, you know, first night." He spoke like the victim of some natural disaster.

"How do you feel now?"

"I'm okay. Champagne with cognac always puts me right. Though mind you, it's got to be cognac, not this filthy local brandy. You're a fisherman, Gerda tells me."

"I do fish, yes."

"How about taking a boat after lunch, the two of us, eh?"

"I'm really not at all expert."

"That's all right, neither am I. We'll just trawl for mullet and bream—what do they call 'em here, *dentex?* That's a hell of a name to give a fish."

"What about your wife?"

"She wants to go to Lokrum, going to show it to that cousin of yours. I've been out half a dozen times myself, sooner do a bit of fishing. Bores Gerda, I know it does. Anyway, I want to have a quiet natter."

"All right, let's go fishing."

Later, walking round Dubrovnik with Felix, he learned a little more about the intended expedition to Lokrum. Sitting between the coupled columns in the elegant cloister of the Franciscan monastery, swinging a leg clad in tight sky-blue slacks, Felix calmly admitted that he had deliberately arranged it.

"Let's be frank about it, Porter's a slob but Hel's poison. You don't want to be mixed up with her."

"I am not mixed up, as you put it."

"Oh, come *on*." Felix could not help posing, whatever his surroundings, and now he turned away from Robin so that his fine profile was outlined against the gray stone like the head on a coin. "You follow her with your eyes wherever she goes, you treat her as though she were made of china. And believe me she's not, she's tough as old boots. I know her kind." Robin made no reply. Felix went on. "Even old slob Porter must spot it soon. So I thought I'd remove you from temptation this afternoon. And for the rest of the time we're here—well, they tell me there are lots of perfectly fascinating places to see on guided tours."

"Thank you." He knew how much Felix disliked guided tours.

"Think nothing of it. And now shall we go and look at the Museum of the Socialist Revolution? You know I've been longing to do that ever since I got here."

They visited the museum and then went round the ramparts. Coming away from them down the narrow steps Felix slipped and fell. He got up and grimaced. He had twisted his ankle. After hobbling back to the hotel he borrowed Robin's stick. "If I'm going to hobble I'll do it in style, look like a man of distinction."

He was with Gerda alone for a few minutes before lunch. She wore an "op art" dress in zigzags that drew a great many eyes to her. Catching a brief glimpse of them

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both in a glass and admiring his own dark-blue linen shirt and pale trousers, he could not help thinking they made a handsome couple. She let him buy her a drink in the bar. She spoke rapidly.

"This afternoon your cousin takes me to Lokrum, so I shall be out of the way. You will drink coffee with us after lunch."

"Hel, I don't know."

"What?" she said sharply. "What do you not know?"

"Whether I can go through with it."

She finished her drink, turned on her heel, and left him.

After lunch it was Porter who stopped by their table and suggested that they all have coffee together. Really, Robin thought, if ever a man could be called the architect of his own destruction it was Porter—but no doubt Hel had put him up to it. She smiled briefly as she waited for them at the table, with coffee already poured. Porter was jovial.

"You know what made me marry Gerda? Because she's the most honest woman I ever met."

"Is that so?" Felix made the question sound like an insult.

"You know she worked for me as a courier and I found she had a phony work permit. So when I said marry me she said, 'I might consider it; this way at least I won't have to worry about a permit'."

"The kind of thing that other people think I am prepared to say." Gerda spoke with a touch of complacency.

"And would you believe it, she made another condition. A girl in her position, making conditions with me!" He roared with laughter. "You're more than twice my age, she says, you'll have the best years of my life. So what happens to me when you die? She actually *said* that, mind you. So I told her I'd look after her, and I have."

"Very rash." Felix murmured the words so that Porter did not hear them, but Gerda did.

"I am a German, and Germans are realistic." Her glance at Felix was hostile. It seemed likely to be an uncomfortable afternoon for them both on Lokrum. "We will walk down to the boat with you. If you can manage that," she said to Felix.

"I'm improving rapidly." Certainly he limped much less as they went down to the harbor. Porter was carrying some fishing tackle in case, as he said, he had a chance to use it. Robin changed into clean shorts. The crisp elegance of his appearance contrasted favorably, he thought, with Porter's sweat-stained shirt and general grubbiness.

The slick young man who rented the boat indicated with a slightly contemptuous air the trawling lines fixed to it, and Porter nodded and waved his hand to indicate that he did not need to be told. He climbed in, complete with fishing tackle.

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Robin in the stern started the outboard, and they were away. Felix and Gerda waved from the harbor.

They skirted Lokrum and moved into the open water beyond. Porter dropped his lines, lighted a pipe, and sat back. He looked what he was—a prosperous businessman carrying too much weight. Robin stared at him, unable to believe what he was going to do.

"Tell me something." Porter's next words were inaudible. Robin almost closed the throttle, so that the boat jogged up and down on the blue water.

"What's that?"

"I like you, Robin, so I thought I ought to—" His next words were again inaudible. "Gerda," he ended.

"I can't hear properly." He closed the throttle completely, so that the motor cut out. They drifted slowly toward the island, his island, only a few hundred yards away. Porter's voice came through the stillness.

"Gerda likes to be with me. I don't say she's happy, because she's not a contented person, never would be. But don't get the wrong idea."

"I don't know what you mean."

"She likes me. She thinks of crazy things, does them sometimes. Ran away from me once, came back after a couple of weeks, no money. She needs money, that's her motive power, like the engine that runs this boat. So she always comes back."

"Why are you telling me this?" There was something wrong in the boat.

"Just wanted you to understand. I'm not a fool, Robin—I may look it but I'm not. Why do you think I let her do this crazy little job out here? Think I haven't got other couriers? I knew she wanted an affair, wanted to let off steam."

With a feeling of disbelief he saw that his cane lay just below Porters' fishing tackle. "How did that get there?" he cried.

"What? Oh, the cane. Your cousin asked me to slip it in with my tackle, thought you might need it. In case the rocks were slippery, he said. He's a bit of a joker, that boy."

"I don't understand."

"About Gerda now, don't get the wrong idea, that's all. You were just a pebble who happened to be on the beach. She doesn't like men of our age. I ought to know." Porter knocked out his pipe. "Okay, start her up again."

Robin tugged savagely at the cord and the outboard sprang to life. They roared through the water with the throttle wide open. When will it happen, he thought, when are the pills going to work? I can't stand much more of this. He felt weary himself, a weariness that sprang from the bad dreams and restlessness of the night.

Porter's voice seemed to come from far away and he ignored it. The island loomed larger, and momentarily he lost his grip on the tiller. Porter was scrambling to-

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ward him, his face alarmed. The boat rocked. Robin began to laugh.

"Better not upset the boat when you can't swim," Robin warned.

"Who the hell told you I couldn't swim? All fat men can swim. Here, give me the tiller, I'll take the boat in. Are you ill?"

He wanted to say that he had the situation under control and that Porter's own wife had said he was a non-swimmer; but suddenly he was too tired to speak. *She's made a mess of it,* he thought as Porter leaned over him, pushing him to the bottom of the boat in his anxiety to steer. *She put the pills in the wrong cup.* Then he could no longer keep his eyes open.

He was in the middle of a dream which was both pleasurable and disturbing. Pleasurable because he was not fighting for breath as he had been last night, nor involved in any kind of struggle. He lay on the island beach, just a few yards from the sea, the sun burning down. Concern about the boat was removed by the sight of it carefully drawn up onto the beach.

Good old Porter! All that nonsense about the boat overturning—it must have been nonsense because Porter could swim. It had been a figment of his imagination. "Figment," he said happily, but could not hear the word. When he felt more energetic he would go into the sea.

Why was he disturbed then? Well, first of all, was he dreaming or not? "Do I wake or sleep?" he asked, but again could hear no words spoken. But that was not the main thing. The main thing was that in his dream he had heard a cry. Perhaps the cry of a bird, but no bird was visible. Had the cry wakened him, or was he still dreaming?

He found it difficult to focus. The boat, like everything else, looked hazy. And now a monster appeared in the sea, vanished, reappeared briefly, then sank under the waves. What kind of monster? Dark and with nothing very distinguishable in the way of a head, a strange dark monster that writhed and splashed and vanished. The sea snake of Dubrovnik?

But surely sea snakes did not exist. I refuse to believe in you, monster, he thought, you are part of my dream. And sure enough the monster had gone—he *was* dreaming. He closed his eyes again.

When they reopened the sun was low in the sky and had lost its power. He felt cold, he knew that he was awake, and his uneasiness had increased. Where was Porter? Asleep somewhere else? It was still an effort to move, and a greater effort to think.

Had Porter gone back to Dubrovnik? There was something wrong with this idea, and he worked out what it was. Porter could not have gone to Dubrovnik or the boat would not still be on the beach.

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Something else worried him, something done or said which he must try to remember. Was it perhaps that he had never even attempted what he had set out to do, that whether through his fault or hers he had failed? Oh, hell, he thought, oh, hell, oh, Hel, what is there left for us now?

And then he traced the origin of this particular uneasiness. Hel, she had said, was a special name, one that even her husband never used, and that he himself must never use in public. He had not done so. How did it happen that Felix knew the name? He remembered the conversation, which seemed long ago although it was only this morning; he even remembered the words: "Porter's just a slob but Hel's poison."

Desperately, like a man submerged trying to reach the surface, he strove to understand this but failed.

At the far end of the beach, jewels glittered. Were they diamonds? Through the haze of his mind came the thought that jewels are not found on beaches. If he was lying on jewels it would be proof that he was dreaming. He picked up a handful of sand, looked at it, saw that it was the characteristic powdery shingle of the coast. It did not shine, so why were diamonds flashing less than a hundred yards away?

Collect them, he thought, sell them, and he would be rich. He tried to get up, dropped on his knees again dizzily, and then managed it. Tottering like an invalid he approached the thing that shone. Half a dozen yards away he identified it. His swordstick, removed from its walking-stick sheath, was what glittered in the setting sun.

But that was not surprising—the sun always glittered on metal. But what was it doing here, and why did one end of it look dull? At the same time he noticed dark smears on his shirt.

He ran down to the sea, dipped the blade in the water. The stick itself lay a little farther back up the beach. He stared at it, stared again at the blade, began to shiver. The putt-putt of an engine came into his consciousness, and looking out to sea he saw a motor launch making for the island. A man in uniform stood in the bow, blasts sounded on a hooter.

Robin Edgley dropped to his knees and prayed that what he saw and felt might still be a dream . . .

The young Yugoslav lieutenant of police and his assistant found the woman's husband without difficulty. The body lay a few yards back from the beach in a hollow, with stab wounds through the chest. The weapon was present, the sword stick which the man Edgley had been cleaning in the water.

As for the motive, the woman herself had admitted behaving badly with Edgley when she called on

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them to ask for police help because she was worried that the boat had not returned. The Lieutenant found the situation both ridiculous and disgusting. One would not have supposed—this was the only surprise—that so fussy a man as this Englishman would have been capable of so vigorous a reaction.

He offered no resistance when the Lieutenant handcuffed him. They put the dead man into the other boat, and his assistant brought it back. On the return journey the Lieutenant, who was proud of the English he had learned as a second language at school, tried without success to make conversation. The Englishman said almost nothing, except when they passed Lokrum. Then he made the suggestion that a man wearing skindiving equipment could have swum from Lokrum to the island.

"It would be possible," said the Lieutenant. "But what man? And my dear Mr. Edgley, how would he have obtained your sword? And why were you cleaning the sword when we came?"

"It is hopeless," Edgley said, and then after a pause, "It was all planned, of course."

Was this a kind of religious determinism, a reference to the God in whom Edgley no doubt believed? The Lieutenant decided to make the situation clear. "It is hopeless to attempt to deceive. But it was a crime of passion. You will find that we understand such things. You will perhaps be only five years in prison."

The Englishman made no reply. He said only one more thing, just before they tied up in Dubrovnik harbor. The woman waited there, her gold hair visible in the dusk. A man whom the Lieutenant knew to be Edgley's cousin waited with her. Edgley then said something which the Lieutenant, in spite of his excellent English, did not understand. "Will you please repeat that?" he asked, a little annoyed.

"A theme for Hyacinth," Edgley said. "It is a theme for Hyacinth alone."

It made no better sense the second time.

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One of the cleverest in William Brittain's "The Man Who Read" series . . . If you solve the problem before reading the last two lines of this story, you will have beaten the Editors at their own game!

THE MAN WHO READ SIR ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

by WILLIAM BRITTAIN

TO MOST PEOPLE A LETTER WITH A Washington, D.C. postmark wouldn't seem too exciting. But when you're the owner, editor, and entire staff of a small-town weekly newspaper, you can get pretty desperate for something besides apple pie recipes and corn prices to interest the public and increase readership.

Walking down Main Street from the post office where I'd picked up my mail to the ramshackle building where I put out the *Spannersburg Herald* every Thursday, I tore open the envelope and began reading the scribbled words on the paper inside.

Dear Terence,

Once again your old college buddy comes to the aid of one of your subscribers-in-distress. In the Questions and Answers section of your issue of June 18, there was a query from a Virginia DeLong of 740 Marsh Street, N.Y.C. You might drop her a line and tell her that the part of the quotation she's trying to remember is, "There's no police like Holmes."

Always glad to be of help. Maybe you can return the favor sometime.

Danny Blassingame

Sounds like a nice straightforward letter-to-the-editor, doesn't it? But I smelled a rat—three of them, in fact. And after I had a chance to go through the back files, the odor of a fourth filled the air.

Item: Nobody named Virginia DeLong of New York City ever subscribed to the *Herald*. The farthest any of my 418 readers lives is three miles outside of Spannersburg, at the end of a dirt road.

Item: There is not now, nor has there ever been a Questions and Answers column in the paper.

Item: While I did attend the Durham University School of Journalism and might have met somebody there named Danny Blassingame, I didn't remember him. Certainly he was not the "old college buddy" he claimed to be.

Item: My paper is a weekly, not a daily. And I hadn't put out an issue on a June 18 in the last three years.

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I took another look at the envelope. It had my name on it, all right—Terence Watson. The address was correct, too. I reached into the bookcase behind my desk and found my old college yearbook. A few minutes later I had what I was looking for. When I was a senior at Durham, there was a Daniel Blassingame in the sophomore class. His face looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't remember where I'd last seen him.

I jammed the letter and envelope into my jacket pocket. Then on an impulse I pulled out the letter again and looked at it. I grabbed the phone, dialed the operator, and asked for New York City information.

Forty seconds later I was talking to Virginia DeLong. After reading her the letter, I asked if she had any answers to the questions buzzing around in my head.

She hung up on me.

I sat there for a minute staring at the dead phone in my hand, then shrugged. You can't win 'em all, I thought. And I wasn't about to spend any more time chasing down a lead that would probably go nowhere. Leave that to the big city dailies. I'd stick to reporting local farm auctions.

It was about one o'clock that same day when the stranger poked his head through the door of my office. He was young—middle twenties, I'd guess—and unlike most of my visitors he was wearing a well-tailored suit and carrying a smart-looking brief case. "Mr. Watson?" he asked in a flat, businesslike voice.

"That's right." I looked up at him and smiled.

He didn't smile back.

"Will you come with me, please?"

"Come with you? I don't even know you. Where are we going?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I thought they'd already told you about—I mean, I think this will explain everything."

He reached into an inner pocket, pulled out a leather folder, and flipped it open. I looked wide-eyed through the clear plastic windows of the folder at credentials that would have opened any door in the nation including Fort Knox if he'd wanted to get in there.

"Look, mister," I said, trying to keep my hands from shaking, "I just run this newspaper. I'm not a foreign agent. And if it's about my income tax—"

It was the nearest I ever saw him come to smiling. "You received a letter today from Daniel Blassingame." The way he said it, it was a statement, not a question. "Have you talked to anyone about it?"

"Just the telephone call I made to that gal in New York. She hung up on me."

"Anyone else?"

"Nope. Nobody's even been in the office today."

"Good." He glanced at his watch. "We'd better get going, Mr. Watson. The plane's waiting."

"What plane?" I asked. "Where

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are you taking me? What's this all about?"

He shook his head. "I'm not allowed to discuss anything with you except the weather," he said, "but I guess I can tell you that you've been ordered to Washington."

"Ordered? Me? I'm not in the army. Nobody can order—"

"According to the statutes governing national security—"

Fifteen minutes later I was at Rockton airport, getting into an Army jet. And two hours after that I was walking through the door of an office in Washington, D.C. Nobody in Spannersburg had even had time to know I'd left town.

Inside the office was a huge oak desk and behind it a man was seated bolt upright, as if he'd had an iron bar welded to his spine. He had a face as hard as a clenched fist, and when he glanced up at me I knew he'd be a tough person to have as an enemy. According to the sign on the desk, his name was James Harbell.

"That'll be all, Akins," Harbell said to the man who had brought me. "Any trouble getting him here?"

"No, sir. He came quietly. He has the letter and the envelope in his pocket."

"Good. Close the door on your way out."

As Akins left, Harbell motioned me to a chair next to his desk. When I sat down, he held out a hand that looked as knotty as a slab of wood.

"May I see it, Mr. Watson?" he said softly.

"See what?"

"The letter. Agent DeLong told us what it contained after you called her. I want to compare what she told us with the original."

"DeLong? You mean that girl I talked to on the phone was—"

"—one of our people? Of course. That's how we found out you'd received the letter. Agent Akins was sent to Spannersburg immediately. Now may I have the letter, if you please?"

"No." I leaned back in the chair. "No, I don't believe you can." The look in Harbell's eyes almost made me wish I'd kept my mouth shut, but I went on. "Before I show you that letter—if I ever do—I'd like a few answers."

"Answers?"

"Yeah. This morning I committed the apparently awful crime of opening a letter addressed to me. Then I committed the awful crime of making a phone call to New York. As a result I've been yanked away from my work onto a jet plane by a man I don't even know, and brought hundreds of miles without even time to pack a toothbrush and a clean shirt. But I've had it, Harbell. I don't give you that letter until I know just why you want it."

"I could take it from you by force," said Harbell without raising his voice.

"Yes, and I could scream bloody

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murder. I don't think you'd like that, especially if I screamed to the newspapers. Whatever's going on, you obviously want to keep it hush-hush. And either I know what it is or I'm walking out of here and taking the letter with me."

I could see Harbell's face getting red. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, giving himself time to cool off. When he spoke it was still in that deceptively soft tone.

"Okay, Mr. Watson," he said. "As an American citizen, you've got your rights. I just wish you hadn't picked this time to exercise them so vehemently. But as the recipient of the letter you might be able to help us.

"I'd like to make one thing absolutely clear, however, especially since you're a newspaperman. Nothing of what is said in this office is to be spoken of or even hinted at outside. Not in the papers, not in private conversation—nowhere!"

"Agreed."

"Very well. Let's take a hypothetical situation."

I smiled. Whenever somebody says "hypothetical" to a reporter, it means he's about to mention an actual situation, but if he's quoted later, he'll call the reporter a liar. Okay, if Mr. James Harbell wanted to play it that way, it was all right with me.

"In my—er—hypothetical case," Harbell went on, "there's a certain Embassy building here in Washington. The country that Embassy represents is lined up with the U.S.A. in the cold war, but it could easily be tipped into going the other way." He motioned to a map behind his desk which showed the Eastern hemisphere.

"Inside that Embassy, as part of its staff, are a group of people who would like nothing better, for propaganda purposes, than to put us in an embarrassing situation. This group, without the knowledge of the Ambassador himself, have got hold of a list, Mr. Watson—a list of individuals living in that country who, from time to time, have passed on information to us. Nothing of great importance. It's just that the citizens of the country involved might have objections to a security network set up right under their noses."

"Security network?" I said. "That means spies, doesn't it?"

"We prefer the other term. At any rate, the list hasn't yet left the Embassy. We can't search the place because technically it's on foreign soil. But we have been able to get one of our men planted inside as an employee. He's been able to convince the group who have the list that he wants to join their little plan to make us look bad."

I nodded. "Would the man's name just happen to be Danny Blassingame?" I asked.

"You're very astute, Mr. Watson," said Harbell. "If you ever leave the newspaper business, we might have a place for you here. Anyway, he's

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the one who found out about the box."

"The box?"

"The list will be sent out of the U.S.A. in a metal box, Mr. Watson. It will not be given the immunity of the diplomatic pouch but will instead be sent by special messenger. Our job is to open that box and get back the list before the messenger leaves the country."

"Why not just grab the messenger and take the box away from him?"

"The group at the Embassy would be delighted if we did that. Think of the headlines—*Foreign Messenger Waylaid by Government Agents.* From their point of view it would be better than actually having the list. Remember their whole purpose is to turn the people of their own country against the United States.

"No, the only time we can get our hands on the box is just as the special messenger boards his ship in New York. Then we'll have about two minutes at Customs to open it and inspect the contents without the messenger's knowledge, before returning the box to him.

"Now let me describe this box to you, Mr. Watson. It's about the same size and shape as an ordinary cracker box. On the lid is a small latch and three combination dials, each containing all the letters of the alphabet. The lid can be raised only when these three dials are set in the proper sequence.

"The inside of the box is divided into two parts. One section contains the list; the other has a smoke bomb."

"A what?"

"A smoke bomb. And that bomb will go off the moment anyone turns the latch and tries to raise the lid—*unless* he has previously dialed the correct three letters.

"There is our problem. In two minutes we have to find the proper combination, raise the lid, and get back the list. Otherwise we must either allow the messenger to go aboard his ship with the list or fill the dock area with smoke, announcing to the world that we were searching an Embassy messenger without permission. Either way, this country is placed in an awkward position, resulting in a propaganda coup for the other side."

"So Blassingame's job was to learn the three letters of the combination."

"That's it. And he did better than we expected. According to his last message to us, Blassingame himself was to adjust the mechanism of the box—to choose the three letters, in effect."

"Then why didn't he tell you the ones he was going to choose?"

"He was afraid they'd change their minds at the last minute. He was holding off until the box was actually rigged. But since that time they've clamped tight security on the Embassy. Nobody in or out. Blassingame hasn't had a chance to get word to us in more than a week.

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We do know one thing, however. Blassingame told us that the three letters to be dialed had to be in consecutive order—ABC or DEF or RST, or something like that."

"So instead of having an almost infinite number of choices, you now have one chance in twenty-six—no, one in twenty-four—of getting the correct combination."

"Right. If we get the first letter, the other two follow naturally. And we think the clue to the correct combination is in that letter you received. Blassingame couldn't contact us, but he took the chance they'd allow him to write to an old college pal who couldn't possibly be connected with anything like this. And now, may I see the letter, Mr. Watson?"

I passed it across the desk.

Harbell read it carefully. "'There's no police like Holmes,'" he said musingly. "That must be the operative phrase. And your name's Watson. Ever read Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Mr. Watson?"

"Just some of the Sherlock Holmes stories," I said. "And call me Terry. Everybody else does."

"Fine, Terry. Too bad your name wasn't John, like Dr. Watson's in the stories. Then everything would fit perfectly."

"John was my roommate in college," I answered.

"I beg your pardon?"

"In college we were assigned to rooms alphabetically. I roomed with another Watson. His name was John—John Howard Watson. He's got a job in Philadelphia."

"John H. Watson. Damn it!" said Harbell.

"Huh?"

"If Blassingame was trying to point us toward Sherlock Holmes, why didn't he contact this John Watson instead of you?" asked Harbell.

"Maybe that's it. Maybe Blassingame was trying to indicate my first name."

"Terry—Terence . . . No, it's too vague. He must mean the Holmes part."

"So now what?" I asked.

"So now we begin reading Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories all over again. There must be a clue in one of them."

Harbell lifted up the phone and barked some orders into the mouthpiece. Within twenty minutes he not only had several volumes of *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* in his office but had admitted and introduced me to two men named Klein and Dykeman who turned out to be members of the local chapter of The Baker Street Irregulars and well-known authorities on Sherlockiana.

And so we began. *A Study in Scarlet* had us puzzling for forty-five minutes over the word "Rache" before we gave up. When we finished *The Sign of Four,* I found myself more interested in the story than in any code it might contain.

The Dancing Men was promising, but finally yielded nothing; nor did

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The Five Orange Pips or *The Red Circle*. Klein had high hopes for *The Musgrave Ritual*, but he was doomed to disappointment. There was nothing we could find that pointed to a series of three consecutive letters of the alphabet.

"That pun on the name of Holmes is what confuses me," said Dykeman, frowning. "It's not something that Doyle himself wrote, you know."

"I know, but it's not something that Blassingame would throw in unless he had a reason. He was devious, but he never had much sense of humor," added Harbell.

I just shrugged. I was still with Holmes and Watson, waiting for the hound to come bounding out of the fog.

By midnight the four of us in the room were all on a first-name basis. I had become an authority on Holmesian lore ranging from the cocaine bottle and the "V.R." punched in bullet holes on the wall of 221B Baker Street (maybe you think we didn't give *those* numbers and letters a thorough going-over), to Sebastian Moran's air gun and the gasogene (whatever that was) on the sideboard.

And we'd got absolutely nowhere. Why Blassingame had written to me instead of to John Watson—why he had included that clever pun—nothing seemed to fit.

I was halfway through *The Lion's Mane*, figuring it might have a clue because it was one of the few stories Holmes himself was supposed to have written, when I heaved the book into a corner and looked at Harbell through aching eyes.

"You know, Jim," I said, my voice shaking, "I'll never make a spy. What's the use of sending a message if the guy receiving it doesn't know what you're talking about? We have here the ultimate in secret codes—*Nobody* knows what it means. If Blassingame were back in Spannersburg where I come from, and he wanted to give you this information, he'd just walk up to you on the street and say—oh—'IJK, Jim Harbell'—or—"

Klein and Dykeman both started to laugh. Klein whispered something to Harbell, and he began with a chuckle that soon became a roar. For a few minutes I sat there with a puzzled look on my face, then they told me the joke and I got in a few good yaks myself. Klein and Dykeman were sent home, and I went with Harbell to his place to get some sleep.

Maybe you remember reading in the papers how some characters in a certain Embassy in Washington were declared *persona non grata* and booted back home. But not a word was said about the box or the list that Harbell's agents found in it—not only because we wanted to save face but also because that crew in the Embassy still think Dan Blassingame is on their side and that we were just lucky. But when our men got their hands on that box for the

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two-minute inspection, they knew the right combination.

Maybe it was luck, at that. If I hadn't said what I did, we might still have been reading Sherlock Holmes stories. But Blassingame's code, which explained both the pun and why he got in touch with me, was based on the most familiar phrase connected with the Holmes stories. And the pun was worse than the one in Blassingame's letter.

What were the dials set at? Think about it. When I said, "IJK, Jim Harbell," what would be his logical comeback?

"LMN, Terry Watson."

Elementary, Watson.

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The story of a Hollywood television writer who had it made. "Meticulous, perfection-seeking in his plots, he liked to think of himself as a human computer infallibly clicking out complex detective puzzles." All he had to do was apply his creative talent to a real-life situation; after all, "his plotting was flawless, absolutely flawless" . . .

PLAY IT COOL, PAL

by ALEX PELLE

THIS IS IT, PAL. THE END.

You nearly made it, but you had a fatal case of *hubris*. Know what the word means? "Overweening pride, provoking divine retribution." That's the classical Greek version; here in California we like to use A. J. Liebling's definition: "sensitive swelled-head."

You could have been a pretty fair writer. Not like Dostoievsky or Rod Serling, but good enough to make a gorgeous living. You had class and the right people liked you. Desilu was going to buy the finished pilot script and Steve McQueen was going to play the private eye. The series would have been good for three or four years, even more, before it went to daytime reruns.

It was all there, ready for the taking—the big house in Brentwood or Beverly Hills, the summer place at Newport Beach, the socialite wife, the ratpack-style Dual Ghia. All you had to do was reach out and take it; all you had to do was finish writing the pilot.

Now you can't, won't, and never will. You slouch, utterly deflated, in the back of the black-and-white patrol car, staring through the wire grating at the two policemen. Soon they'll reach the station, take your fingerprints, remove your belt and empty your pockets, put you in a cell and lock the door. Then you'll pace up and down, remembering how your life, dreams, and future all slipped away, draining like water down a dirty gray funnel.

And you'll know, pal, that none of it would have happened if you hadn't met yourself, head-on, at the right, the wrong, the one irrevocable moment . . .

Dwight Parker frowned, scratched his blond crew-cut, swore under his breath, and ripped the spoiled page out of the humming electric typewriter. He rolled a fresh sheet into position and started to recopy the page, touch-typing expertly:

53 JACK ANVIL'S POINT OF VIEW—MED SHOT OF LINDA

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LINDA
Why did you say that? I thought you were trying to help me; I thought you were on *my* side!

She looks at Jack reproachfully. PAN WITH HER as she walks to the desk and picks up her handbag.

54 MED SHOT OF JACK
as he answers.

JACK
I was, baby. I even let myself fall in love with you.

He paces up and down the room.

55 CU OF LINDA'S HANDS
opening the purse, reaching for the gold-plated derringer.

56 CU OF JACK
as he lights a cigarette, unaware of the danger.

57 MED SHOT OF LINDA
wjp wjor;s. Derromger traomed pm Amvo's keart. wptj

"Oh, nuts!" Dwight Parker said disgustedly.

Somehow or other the fingers of his right hand had strayed to the right of proper position. Fuming, he tried to erase the line of gibberish. The pencil-top eraser was nearly worn away; its metal rim tore the paper. Swearing unprintably, he pulled the ruined sheet out of the typewriter. His hand grazed the tall glass of Scotch-on-the-rocks. It tipped. He snatched at the pile of finished typescript. In time—in time, thank God!—but the desk top swam with spilled whiskey and ice cubes.

Parker stared at the mess, feeling acute distaste.

He loathed sloppiness of any sort. Meticulous, perfection-seeking in his plots, he liked to think of himself as a human computer infallibly clicking out complex detective puzzles. He never cheated the reader by withholding vital clues or left the smallest loophole in his all-enfolding net of logic. His style sometimes faltered, that he had to admit, but his plotting was flawless, absolutely flawless.

Sighing, he mopped the desk top with the nearest thing at hand, his new beach towel, the sassy one that bore the printed legend: *Go to Hell, Go Directly to Hell, Do Not Pass Go, Do Not Collect Two Hundred Dollars.* Then, lighting a cigarette, he sat at the desk and wallowed in tired self-pity.

Why not call it a day? Why not pour another drink, turn on the TV, and settle down on the couch, glass in hand, ready to pick up a good line of dialogue or an interesting gimmick? But it was nearly four o'clock in the morning and the only fare that *TV Guide* offered was:

MOVIE—Musical
"Great American Broadcast." (1941) Musical comedy about the adventures of three men and a girl during the early days of radio broadcasting. Alice Faye, Jack Oakie.

He threw the copy of *TV Guide*

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across the room and walked to the picture window of his cramped bachelor apartment—"Prestige Living at Hollywood's Polynesian Gardens, $125 Monthly & Up"—to gaze at the philodendron-planted patio, the brightly lighted pool. Perhaps a quick dip would wash away some of his angry frustration. No, the pool heater was still out of order. He could hear the faint tinny whistle of the underground machinery.

Well, how about a drive? A fast drive, with the top down, on an almost empty four-in-the-morning freeway? He did it often, calling it "California-style catharsis."

Quickly, before he could change his mind, he donned his gold-colored elbow-patched sweater (the elbows were perfectly sound under the oval black patches) and trotted across the patio to the carports in the rear. He smiled with pleasure at sight of his Super Sports convertible, an aging but beautifully kept automobile, tan with black vinyl-upholstered bucket seats. The rear bumper bore a waggish hand-printed sticker. It read: *Who is John Galt?*

He wasn't really fond of the Ayn Rand novel or its hero. The sticker was just a conversation piece, a good ploy to use with semi-intellectual girls.

The engine started quickly but the top came down with a small straining noise. He worried briefly, as he always did, about the die-cast folding rails that carried the vinyl fabric back and forth. It might be wise, he thought, to leave the top down for the rest of the summer. Then he could raise it, for the last time, when the rainy season began. And if all went well, he might be able to buy the Dual Ghia before October and the first rains.

He pulled out of the driveway, moved to the end of the street, made a right turn onto Sunset Boulevard, and headed east toward the freeway on-ramp. The night was cool, the breeze refreshing. Leaning back in the bucket seat, he lit a cigarette and turned on the radio.

"*It's been a h-a-r-d day's night,*" the Beatles blared, "*And I've been working like a d-o-o-g!*"

Parker smiled at the unexpected aptness of the song. "I sure have," he said aloud. Then he sang along with the Beatles, "*To get you mon-on-ey, to buy you thin-in-ings!*"

The light turned red. Still singing, he braked to a smooth stop. Seconds later, a car pulled up beside him. It was an old green Plymouth, packed with teen-aged kids. The driver stared at Parker, smiled and whispered something to the dark Mexican-looking girl who sat beside him. Parker stopped singing. The light turned green and the Plymouth roared, shooting past his stationary car. A blond boy with a Beatle haircut jeered from the rear window, making an insolent gesture with his thumb.

The kids were looking for a street race, that was obvious.

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Why not? thought Parker. Throughout Los Angeles' 460 square miles, dozens of other teen-aged kids and more than a few adults were cruising the streets, looking for challenge and action. The cops caught and ticketed, for "speed contests," five or six a night. But they estimated that ten times as many street racers escaped.

Parker snorted, turned the radio louder, and moved forward. Ahead, the juiced-up Plymouth stopped with screeching brakes for the next red light. Parker timed the approach perfectly, reaching the intersection just as the signal turned green. Passing the motionless Plymouth at 45 miles per hour, he lifted his thumb high in the air.

"*How does it f-e-e-l?*" a new voice wailed from the tan convertible's vibrating speaker. "*How does it f-e-e-l to be on your o-o-own with no di-rek-shun h-o-o-m-e?*"

Smiling, Parker gunned the engine, sped for two or three blocks, shifted into the right-hand lane, slowed and turned onto the southbound entrance ramp of the Hollywood Freeway. That fixed your wagon, Buster Brown! he thought triumphantly. Then he saw a pair of headlights glaring in his rear-view mirror; the Plymouth was following, rocketing down the ramp at dangerous speed.

"Fool kids!" he muttered. "They should be home in bed!"

He moved into the center lane, traveling at 70, the customary five miles over the legal speed limit. The Plymouth passed on his right—the old car must have been doing close to 80. The devil with it, he thought waspishly; it isn't worth the effort. But he felt temptation, irresistible temptation.

Why not show those arrogant kids some *real* speed?

He pushed the throttle to the floorboard. The car surged forward, traveling at 80, 85, 90 miles per hour. "*How does it f-e-e-l?*" Bob Dylan roared. "*HOW DOES IT F-E-E-L?*"

The Plymouth put on a burst of speed. He drew level with it; then, grinning his triumph, he forged into the lead. The enemy driver shook his fist in mock anger. Parker glanced at the speedometer. The needle stood at 105. He felt a sense of power, brute power, power that surged like lust through his nervous loins. Then he cut in front of the Plymouth, intending to give the kids a little scare.

There was a faint metallic shriek as rear and front bumpers clashed, barely tangent. He fought the wild animal in his car through a long, seemingly endless skid, pulling out at last with nauseated relief. Behind him, swerving in a wider arc, the Plymouth plunged through the reflector-studded guard rail, plummeting down to the street below. The Plymouth burst into flames.

"*How does it f-e-e-l?*" Bob Dylan shrieked to the wind. "*How does it f-e-e-l?*"

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"Oh, my God!" groaned Parker, turning off the radio. He braked, as hard as he dared, with the vague intention of rendering aid. Then, like a spectral newsreel, a vision of the future rushed upon him. He saw himself arrested, tried on charges of vehicular homicide, convicted, sent to prison. He felt as though he were slipping, sliding, falling into a bottomless gray funnel . . .

"No!" he cried aloud. "No, it isn't fair!"

His foot moved from the brake to the throttle. It rested there without exerting any pressure while he vacillated in agony. Then the foot bore down and the tan convertible moved away from the scene of the accident, traveling at a sedate, unwavering 60.

No one had seen the accident, he thought shrewdly. Those kids are the only ones who know I was involved. But they're dead, all of them—they *must* be dead after a crash like that.

He drove past the Alvarado Street and Glendale Boulevard exits; then, reaching the stack of overpasses at Los Angeles' Civic Center, he shifted onto the southbound Harbor Freeway. He would ride it all the way to Pacific Coast Highway, heading for his mother's house in Palos Verdes. Maybe he'd even spend the week-end there.

What if one of the kids survived? he brooded. Then I'll be in real trouble. He'll tell the cops that they were racing with a tan convertible; he'll tell them that I cut the Plymouth off. But he probably didn't notice the license number—I never noticed *theirs*—so it won't prove a thing.

He passed the Harbor Freeway exit that leads to Exposition Park, the Coliseum, and the University of Southern California campus. Beyond them, in an ever-widening ring, lay South Los Angeles' pastel-colored, tree-shaded, Negro-tenanted slums.

What about the rear bumper? he asked himself. It must be damaged and the cops may stop me—no, that's utter nonsense. Half the cars in California have banged-up rear bumpers; they couldn't connect me with the accident on evidence as flimsy as that. But the bumper sticker! he thought suddenly, starting to tremble. That idiotic bumper sticker! If one of the kids survived, he'll tell the cops. They'll send it out on the radio and every cop from here to San Diego will be watching for an automotive rear end labeled *Who is John Galt?*

Parker felt a frantic urge to leave the freeway, pull the car into a side street, and strip the damning evidence from the bumper. But he had just passed the Slauson Avenue exit; now he would have to drive another three miles to reach the exit at Manchester Avenue.

Who is John Galt? He fought to keep his right foot from floorboarding the throttle. *Who is John Galt?*

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Trying to keep calm, he lit a cigarette and punched the radio button for KXTRA with its 24-hour-a-day newscasting. *Who is John Galt?* "—another brush fire, fanned by stiff winds, is spreading rapidly through Silverado Canyon. Residents are being evacuated—" *W-H-O I-S J-O-H-N G-A-L-T?*

He reached the exit ramp and eased the car around its wide descending arc at the posted speed of 25 miles per hour. By now the accident was nearly ten miles behind him. He turned the radio off and headed west along Manchester Avenue. There wasn't a pair of headlights in sight.

He pulled into a side street, tucked between two rows of window-darkened factory buildings. Heart pounding, he got out of the car, walked to the rear, squatted down, and peered at the bumper. The right side was deeply scored and slightly dented, but less than he had feared. He stripped away the John Galt slogan. It was done in seconds; unlike the gummed-back factory products, his homemade sticker had been held in place with masking tape.

He crumpled it into a ball and tossed it down a curbside sewer opening. Then, as he slid behind the steering wheel, he was struck by another thought. Why not put up the top? That would alter the car's appearance, making it more difficult to spot if one of the kids had lived to give a description. Besides, he felt cold, naked—worst of all, vulnerable.

Parker turned the dashboard knob and the top began to rise. It reached the midpoint; then the right-hand side moved forward while the left side hung back, straining. Hastily, he reversed the knob. There was an angry hum—but nothing happened. Nerves almost screaming, he reversed the knob again. There was a sharp explosive sound and a slash of searing pain.

A heavy bolt, shearing away from the overstrained framework, had shot across the car and opened a long cut just over Parker's right eye.

Blood. Suddenly there was blood. Blood on his face and clutching hand, drops of blood on his sweater, on the steering wheel, on the dashboard and the black vinyl seat. Dazed and only half comprehending, he fumbled for his handkerchief and pressed it to the torn eyebrow. Then he looked up. Over his head the convertible top was skewed into crumpled wreckage. The folding rails were cracked, the narrow supporting bows broken.

The sight of it caused him greater anguish than the physical wound. "Lord!" he moaned. "How can I *drive?*"

Holding the handkerchief to his brow, he got out of the car and tugged at the skewed top, trying to straighten, fold, and lower it into the trunk compartment. It was awkward, brutishly immobile. He

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wrestled with it, swearing in a sullen monotone. The handkerchief started to rain droplets of red on the tan door and fender.

He opened the trunk compartment, looking for a clean rag to tie around the wound. He found none. Desperate, he reached under his sweater and shirt to tear away a strip of his white cotton T-shirt. Wadding a ragged piece into a compress, he tied it into place with a second piece. He used another strip, well moistened with saliva, to scrub the drying blood from his face and hands.

Trying to keep calm, he wrestled again with the ruined top. He couldn't budge it. Fists clenched in impotent rage, he climbed into the car and drove slowly westward along Manchester Avenue, hoping to find an open service station. The twisted top hung above him, the vinyl ballooning slightly like a black sail.

It's all a bad dream, he thought savagely. It couldn't have happened, not to me. I'm back in my own apartment, asleep on the couch, having an idiotic nightmare. I'll wake up in a minute. I'll wake up and laugh, because none of it really happened.

He passed a closed gas station, then another. Don't they have any consideration for *people?* he thought angrily. Behind him, in the east, the first hint of dawn was creeping into the night. He watched the lightening sky with growing apprehension, glancing repeatedly into the rear-view mirror. His haggard-faced reflection eyed him from the silvered glass.

A red light. The intersection of Manchester and Western Avenues. He let the slowly moving convertible roll to a stop while he squinted anxiously at the four service stations, one at each corner. They were all closed. Then his heart did a flipflop. There was a black-and-white patrol car heading north along Western Avenue.

Don't panic, he warned himself. You're riding around with a busted top and a bloody rag on your head; they're bound to ask questions. But they probably won't make any connection with the accident, not unless you give a guilty or frightened impression. So just play it cool, pal. You're a motorist in trouble and you're depending on the cops to help you; it's logical, in fact, for you to approach *them.*

"Hey, where can I find an all-night garage?" Parker called out as the patrol car stopped at the intersection.

Two tan-uniformed policemen stared at Parker and his crippled car. One of them, the driver, stuck out a gesturing arm and ordered, "Pull over to the side."

Despite his coldly forged chain of logic, Dwight Parker felt a thrill of terror. Outwardly he showed nothing, nodding his assent, driving slowly across the intersection as the light turned green, and pulling up on the shoulder. The patrol car

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parked behind him, its dome light flashing, and the driver—a slim good-looking kid—walked toward him.

"You don't know how glad I am to see you," said Parker. "I can't find anyone to help me with this broken top."

"What happened to your head, mister?"

Parker jerked his thumb at the overhead wreckage. "I felt cold and tried to put the top up. One of the bolts sheared off—it came at me like a bullet! I guess I'm lucky I still have my eye."

"You sure are." The cop's tone was even, noncommittal. "Let's see your driver's license."

Parker pulled out his wallet and flipped through the plastic-sheathed credit cards. "Here it is, officer."

The young policeman scanned the license with its tiny portrait of a smiling Dwight Parker. He glanced at the registration card on the steering post, nodded, and handed the license back. "You live in Hollywood. What are you doing in this neighborhood? And at this hour?"

Parker thought fast. "I was playing poker at the Rainbow Club in Gardena—" He named a small town, a few miles to the south, where there are six licensed poker parlors, open to the public until 5:00 a.m. "I lost a hundred and eighty dollars playing five-card draw," he continued, trying to sound factually detailed. "I was heading for home when *this* had to happen!"

He hesitated, deciding that an innocent motorist would, at this point, take the initiative. "Look, officer, can you give me a hand with the top? If we can force it all the way up or down, I'll be able to drive home safely."

The young cop examined the jumbled framework. "Not up," he said, "but if we can pull her into line, we should be able to fold her back, at least most of the way."

Together they tugged at the framework while the second policeman—a much older and slightly corpulent man—watched with a bored expression from the patrol car. Recalcitrant as ever, the broken top refused to fold. "Get your back in it!" Parker urged, beginning to enjoy the ironies involved.

The framework shifted abruptly, scraping the young cop's knuckles. He sucked at his hand. "What a night!"

"Rough one?" Parker asked.

"The usual. Noisy drunks, husbands beating wives, kids breaking curfew. The usual—" He turned his back and tugged at the framework. "Get on the other side," he ordered. "I think we got her out of the bind when I skinned my knuckles."

Parker obeyed. Slowly, very carefully, they folded the wreckage into the trunk compartment. One side sat a little higher than the other, but not enough to matter.

"Officer, I can't thank you enough," said Parker.

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"Take it easy going home. And stay away from those poker clubs—they're no place for an amateur."

Parker should have kept his mouth shut. It was all over. At most he should have said "I sure will" or "You bet" or something equally inane. He shouldn't have pushed it. But he resented the young cop's well-intended words. Did the guy take him for a pigeon? A sucker? A born loser?

"It was just bad luck," he said indignantly. "I couldn't win even when I paired my hole card. Next time *I'll* get lucky."

The young cop smiled, shook his head, and walked toward the waiting patrol car. Parker started the engine. The slim tan-clad figure wavered, stopped, turned. Parker smiled, waved, and released the brake. The rookie watched, biting on his lower lip. Something was nagging in the back of his mind.

"Wait a minute!" he called, walking back with quickening steps.

"Yes?" Parker said calmly.

He knew there was nothing to fear. He had brazened it out, coolly nonchalant, in a situation where a weakling would have fallen prey to sloppy panic. He had been flawless, absolutely flawless. So, still smiling, he kept up the role of grateful motorist, never suspecting that he was slipping, sliding, plummeting toward the bottom of the cold gray funnel.

"Mister, you weren't playing poker tonight," said the young cop, staring full into Parker's eyes. "You lied to me, and I won't turn you loose until I find out *why*. I'll check you and your car with a magnifying glass, if I have to."

"Lied? I d-don't understand you, officer," Parker stuttered slightly.

"'I lost a hundred and eighty dollars playing five-card draw'," the cop echoed. "That's what you said, mister. Word for word. Then we got involved, for five minutes or so, with your broken top—and you forgot one detail of your phony alibi. You complained about your bad luck; you couldn't win, you said, even when you 'paired your hole card.' Well, mister, I've played a little five-card draw—and it isn't played with hole cards."

This is it, pal. THE END.

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Certain themes are irresistible—and foolproof. They can't miss, and suspense is built-in . . . In this story Mr. Gilford has combined three sure-fire elements—a love triangle, a circus background, and Russian roulette. They add up to an unputdownable thriller . . .

THE GRISLY GAME

by C. B. GILFORD

ALEXIS SIGHED, WIPED HIS HANDS on his apron, and glanced at the wall clock. Four A.M. Outside, the Schoenestrasse was quiet. The automobiles were gone. Even the taxis. The city had retired to its beds. Here, in Alexis' bar, it was nearly as still. Only three customers remained, and he had tried to encourage their departure by turning out most of the lights. Bottles and glasses gleamed on their shelves like cats' eyes. The little tables, covered with their neat red-and-white cloths, huddled in the room like small misshapen ghosts.

Alexis was weary. The weariness began in his corn-plastered old feet, came up through his legs, and saturated his whole body. But dutifully he took yet another bottle of wine from the shelf, inserted a corkscrew, twisted, and drew out the cork. Then, carrying the bottle, he shuffled round the end of the bar and over to the corner table.

"Please now," he said to his trio of customers there, "you drink this and you go home, eh?"

Only the girl looked up. A mere glance, her green eyes feverishly bright. But there was a tiredness in her too. In the very brightness of her eyes, in the tiny lines around them, and at the corners of her red mouth, even redder from so many hours of sipping wine.

Alexis decided to appeal to her. "Fraulein," he said, "you have done two shows today. And you must do two more tomorrow—today—today is Sunday, you know."

She smiled, with a smile that just barely altered the perfect lines of her lips. "We will do the two Sunday shows," she assured him. "And they will be better than ever before."

Alexis shook his head. A week ago, when the Hofenstein Circus first arrived in the city, he had seen their acts, holding his breath, a knot of apprehension in his stomach, perspiration on his brow and on the palms of his hands.

He had watched Lori Anders especially. He would have watched her had she merely stood still and posed. Dressed in the briefest of costumes, low-cut bodice and tiny flaring tutu,

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she was a marvelous feminine creature, her arms and shoulders bare and golden, her legs long and slim and lithe and exquisitely shaped.

And her act—ah, that was something! A pair of magnificent white horses, manes flying, galloping in a tight circle inside the ring. Lori Anders riding them, first one and then the other, and sometimes both, dancing, pirouetting on their backs with the grace and precision of a ballerina performing on a solid floor. That was what she had started out to be, he'd been told, a ballerina. But the classical ballet hadn't offered enough glitter or excitement, and now she preferred to do the things that the great dancers did, only on the backs of two charging horses.

The danger of it though! The animals sometimes abreast, sometimes one following the other, and their mistress leaping, twirling, often somersaulting in mid-air from the first horse to the second. What if she should miss her step by the smallest inch, lose her footing on those great, surging, sweating bodies? She would fall to the hard floor, or worse, her fragile body would be trampled under those flying iron hoofs!

Alexis shuddered at the thought. Lori Anders was a great artist. But this thing the three of them were doing every night, this would sap her strength, cloud her judgment, ruin her perfect timing.

"Absolutely," he scolded them. "Absolutely this is the last bottle of wine I give you. Then I close up, and all of you go home."

Michael, the blond young man, glanced at him. "Are you breaking the law, Alexis?" he asked in a soft voice. "Are you afraid of the police? If they catch you staying open too late, we will pay your fine."

"I am tired," Alexis tried to explain.

"Then you go to bed, Alexis, and we will close the bar. You don't trust circus people? Have we once failed to pay our bill?"

"It isn't that, mein herr—"

"You are tired? Then bring another glass and sit down with us, Alexis. We are all friends, aren't we? Come along now, sit down."

He was too exhausted to resist the invitation, much as it violated the habit of a lifetime. He brought the fourth glass, let them pour for him. It would be that much less that any of them would drink, he thought to himself.

"To your health, Alexis," Michael said. "To the excellence of your wine. And may we all meet again when we return next season."

Ah, Alexis thought, he should have said, *if* they all return next season. The way things were going, would all of them live that long?

He looked at them fondly. He had come to love them. Yes, he could say that. Admire them, their skill, their daring. Three beautiful young people. Three beautiful young bodies. With hot heads—and passions.

Michael. Michael Vandrak, the

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blond one, a trifle larger, heavier, sturdier perhaps. And Gerald, the dark one, the silent one. The Vandrak Brothers, that was what the posters said, and the stentorian voice of the ringmaster. But not blood brothers, Alexis knew. Brothers in a different way. Each putting his life into the other's hands, every day.

Alexis had seen them, high in that maze of ropes and wires over the center ring. Bare-chested, muscles rippling in arms and shoulders, Gerald in silver tights and Michael in gold, a pair of defiant young gods.

Alexis had seen many circuses, and he had seen many acts of the high wire. One person usually, whether a man or a girl, but this one person, moving slowly and carefully above a void, progressing finally to some limited acrobatics, usually not more than skipping rope. Or if there were more than one person it was a balancing act, and the trick was merely to get safely from one support pole to the other.

Ah, but the Vandraks, they were different! They actually cavorted on the high wire. Where other performers walked, they ran. They leaped, not carefully but with abandon, and somehow the quivering wire was always beneath both pairs of feet when they came down again.

That was the amazing, the impossible thing about it, people said. One man might manage his balance on that thin metal strand. One body could maintain a sympathetic rhythm with that living entity, the wire. But not two at the same time. For the movement of one to keep his balance would surely throw the other off. Not so the Vandraks. They *were* one body, in perfect tune, perfect rhythm.

Except when they were clowning, of course. Having demonstrated teamwork, they played tricks on each other—or seemed to—at the climax of their performance. Like duelists they would stand face to face, each trying in some way to set the wire swaying so that his companion would topple off.

Madness! One or the other would eventually slip, fall, and save himself only by grasping the wire with his hands as he fell. While the other, the victor, would laugh in gleeful triumph. The spectators could hear that laugh, echoing eerily against the domed ceiling.

Suicidal, people said. Exciting, yes. Enough to make the audience squirm and scream. And finally to acclaim these fantastic young men with riotous applause. But suicidal nevertheless. An unrehearsed act, in which neither of the brothers knew who would stand and who would fall. And with no net beneath to catch them.

"Alexis," Michael said, "it is cold in this stable of yours, but you are sweating."

"I was thinking of your performance this afternoon," Alexis answered honestly.

"Oh, you saw it?"

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"I've seen it nearly every day."

"Well, what do your think? Are we worth the price of admission?"

Alexis took out his big blue handkerchief and mopped his brow. For a moment he hesitated. "You want to know the truth?" he asked finally.

All three flicked glances at him. It was Gerald who said, "Naturally, the truth."

"Very well. I do not like your act."

They looked at one another in disbelief. "You are joking," Michael said. "We have the greatest high-wire act in the world."

Alexis nodded in agreement. "But I do not like it."

Lori's green eyes challenged him, her lips, wet with red wine-dew, smiling. "My horses and I, Alexis, how do you like us?"

He shook his head. "Not at all."

Micahel laughed then. He threw back his head, and his tousled mane of yellow hair flamed in the dim light. An offended, arrogant young god. He raised his wine glass and gave them all a toast. "Alexis Bubenoff, Circus Connoisseur!"

But Gerald, the dark one, didn't even smile. "Wait," he said, "he is serious."

"Serious, no. He is only trying to insult us so that we will leave."

"Shut up, Michael," Lori intervened. And she said it with such sharp, cruel incision that the golden young man, startled and hurt, stopped laughing. "Alexis is a customer, a member of the jury. He has a right to speak his mind." But she was not humble. She was sneering at him.

He was brave nevertheless. He had begun this, and he would finish it. He sipped his wine again.

"Tell us," Gerald urged quietly.

Alexis nodded. "I have been to many circuses. I go to laugh at the clowns, and to be thrilled by the daring and skill of acts like yours. You, my dear young friends, *are* skillful, you *are* daring—"

"But there is no thrill?" Gerald asked.

"Oh, yes—but the wrong kind." He was warming to his task now. "Wait, I will try to explain. What do I want to see at a circus? I want to see brave people doing dangerous things that I could never do myself."

"We invite danger," Gerald interrupted.

Alexis shook his head. "No, you do more than that. And this is what makes me sick inside. I appreciate it when you invite danger. I applaud. I rejoice. But I am sick when I see you invite *death*."

They were silent for a long minute. He did not know whether he had surprised them, or whether they were debating the accuracy of his judgment.

"Danger and death, it is the same thing," Gerald said finally.

Alexis shook his head stubbornly. "I have seen too many circuses," he reminded them. "I know the difference. There is a thrill in danger. You

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feel it for yourself, or when you watch others. It is a good clean feeling. It exhilarates. But that is not what I feel when I see the Vandraks on the wire or Lori Anders on her plunging white horses. For many there is perhaps the morbid fascination. For most people—for me—there is only the sick feeling.

"It is like watching some awful catastrophe—automobiles crashing and burning, skiers buried in an avalanche, or what so many of us older people remember too well—bombs exploding, buildings falling, the shrieks of agony, the moans of those discovering the bodies of loved ones. No, my dear friends, there is a difference. There is excitement in danger, but there are only ugliness and terror in death."

Not daring to look at one another now, the three looked only at him. "They come to watch us," Michael said, though his voice was hollow. "The crowds are bigger than ever."

"Oh, yes. As they gather around the scene of a bloody accident. As they come to watch an execution. They come to watch you die."

"But we fool them."

"Maybe you do. For the moment. But they will wait. They are patient."

"Is it so wrong then?" Lori leaned forward, her eyes glittering like cold emeralds. "They are entertained."

Alexis disagreed. "Is that the way you want to entertain them? What is a circus supposed to be, my dear girl? A happy place, to bring children, to watch them laugh, to hear their cries of pleasure. It is also a place where old men like myself can be children again, laugh and be happy also. I do not want to contemplate death. You are ruining my circus, the circus I know."

"The manager will tell us if we are ruining his business!" Michael was flushed and angry.

"Managers. Oh, yes, the managers will make money. But the people, they will be the losers. Who are you trying to please, the ticket sellers or the audience?"

"He's crazy." Michael said it to the other two. "He's drunk. He's been sitting behind his bar all night, in consultation with his bottle of schnapps."

"He's telling the truth," Gerald argued softly.

Alexis wasn't a drinking man, but he reached across the table for the wine bottle and emptied it into his glass. Then he drank, too swiftly.

"I have seen many circuses," he told them quietly. "I have known many circus people. This has always been a convenient place for them to gather. They have come here to relax from the strain of the performance. I have listened to them, and I know them. Performers, artists, dedicated to entertainment, not to the macabre spectacle of death. I drink to them, to their noble profession."

He drained his glass, groaned out of his chair, and went to the bar.

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When he returned he brought an armful of bottles. He opened one and poured into all the glasses, his unsteady hand spilling red on the tablecloth.

"Now I want to talk, my friends," he continued. "I want to discuss how all this has come to be. What is it? Love? Which one of you loves the girl?"

Silence answered him.

"And which one of you does the girl love?"

They shrank from his concentrated gaze. Lori lit her own cigarette, neither of the Vandraks remembering his politeness. Alexis watched her most of all. She had small hands, delicate fingers. A tiny girl really, exquisitely feminine, infinitely desirable.

"You don't need to tell me," he said. "I have seen you here, night after night. I have seen your performances. Last year I saw the Vandraks. And the year before that. I have eyes. I have ears. Many things have changed. May I begin with those previous years? Thank you."

He took another long sip of wine. It was strong, and he was not used to it, but he needed courage.

"In those other years you Vandraks were young. Oh, I remember. You were young, still learning your profession. Beautiful torsos, glistening with sweat. You two would be the greatest, people said. You strove for perfection, and you worked together perfectly. It was dazzling. That human bodies should be capable of such magnificent feats. Ah!"

He paused, caught up in a vision.

"Then this year there is a difference. You were no longer young somehow, and you were dedicated to something else. What? Finally I recognized it. You were no longer a team. Each of you was more interested in being better than the other, in being more daring. A desperate competition. The climax of the act, trying to dislodge each other from the wire. It was pretending, yes, but it was also *real*."

"No," Gerald said suddenly.

"Oh, but yes. I have watched. I know. Do you think I mean you are trying to kill each other? No, not quite. Not yet. Each of you is trying to prove something about himself. You laugh up there on that wire. We can hear you from below. Each of you is trying to prove he can come closer than the other, closer to death. It will not be the one who dies who will be the loser. It will be the one who first shows fear. How far will you go? Will you still laugh as you are falling? Because you have won? Because you will have proved you are braver? Because Lori will have decided finally that she loves you? You, the dead man?"

"You're crazy!" Michael blurted.

"No, my young friend. You are crazy. You love this girl. Or you call it love. I call it madness. And you, Gerald, you are the same. Perhaps I could forgive Michael—he has always been impulsive. But you are a thinker. You, the son of

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a doctor, are intelligent. You read philosophy. But you suffer from the same madness. You have betrayed your profession. You are no longer an artist. You are only trying to impress a girl."

Lori Anders met his gaze without flinching. "It is all my fault, I suppose?" But she didn't ask the question humbly or sorrowfully.

"Is it always a woman's fault when men are fools?" He toasted her with a sip of wine. "But you, my dear, are more than just a woman. I have watched you in the ring. How can it be that you submit your fragile body to such risks? One blow from those iron-shod hoofs could cripple you, ruin your beauty. One false step and you could fall between those beasts, be trampled to death. Why? You are no ordinary woman, who needs babies and a fireside and the protection of a man who loves you. You exist for thrills. The chance of being killed is the breath of life to you. You are either the bravest or the most foolhardy woman I have ever seen. And that is the secret of your fascination to the Vandraks. You are a *challenge* to their own courage."

Michael pounded his fist on the table, upsetting his glass. The spilled wine ran red across the cloth, like blood. "I love her!" he shouted.

Alexis shook his head in calm disagreement. "You call it love. You want to conquer her, and to do this you must prove you have even more courage than she. You and Gerald try to outdo each other. But also you try to outdo the lady herself. Am I not right, Gerald?

"And you, Lori, you are still a woman. You want to be conquered by superior courage. You dare each of them. Each performance the dare becomes greater and greater. It is like a jumper who raises the bar another inch, and then another inch. Sooner or later the jump becomes humanly impossible. Each one of you is already perilously close to the limit. It is only a question of time now. Today, or tomorrow, or the day after—"

He picked up Michael's overturned glass, refilled it, and did the same with the others. Then they all drank together solemnly.

"It will be a great shame," he went on. "The end of a promising young life. But what is worse is that several thousand people will be eyewitnesses to it. They will see the fall from the high wire, which will take an eternity. They will hear the thud on the floor. Or they will see the frail, lovely body disappear under the iron hoofs. They will hear the scream, and whichever of you it is, you will scream.

"And that will be the tragedy. All those people will have come to be made happy, and they will see death. The circus will never be the same to them—never again . . . It is not good for children to see death."

Once more Alexis lurched to his feet and turned his back on them.

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He went behind the bar where he rummaged inside a drawer. When he found what he wanted, he brought it back and threw it on the table. It fell with a clatter.

"What's that?" Michael asked, startled, unbelieving.

"An old army revolver. Which army I don't remember—there have been so many going back and forth. But it's a serviceable weapon."

The gun was old, black, and it gleamed dully in the dim light. Dark, mysterious, it held the same fascination for the young people as a coiled snake.

"What are you going to do with it?" It was Lori's question, awed, yet with a certain eagerness.

In answer Alexis made another gesture, and a single bullet clinked onto the table top, rolled for a second, then came to rest beside the gun. Ugly and tiny, only an inch long, but fatal-looking.

"I suggest," he added, "that you have the decency to finish your grisly game here so that all those innocent people will be spared the sight."

"What are you talking about?" Michael demanded.

"Russian roulette."

"Are you crazy?"

"Crazy? Ah, that word again. I don't think I am crazy when I ask you, in the name of all people who love the circus, to seek death here, in Alexis' Restaurant, rather than in the ring."

Michael stood up, sending his chair crashing backward. "Come on, Lori. The old man is drunk."

But the girl didn't move. Her eyes were unnaturally bright as they continued to gaze at the revolver. "Alexis," she asked, "who is to play?"

It was as he had suspected. Lori Anders was the initiator, the pacesetter. Michael retrieved his chair and sat down again.

"All three of you must play."

"Of course. I forget. This isn't to be a duel, is it?"

"Only of nerve."

Alexis watched his three guests, measuring them. He flourished his big blue handkerchief. "The rules here are simple, much simpler than the game you play under the spotlights."

He took the revolver from the table and broke it open. "Six chambers, you see. All empty." With his handkerchief he wiped all the surfaces of both the gun and the bullet. "You wonder why I take this precaution? It is for the protection of all of us, including myself. When the game is finished, there will be a dead body on the floor here. It will have to be explained to the police. So there must be no fingerprints other than those of the dead person. The gun must be wiped clean after each turn. And we must all tell the same story—that the deceased committed suicide. He or she threatened us with the revolver so that we could not interfere."

He slipped the bullet into one of

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the chambers and clicked the revolver closed. Handling it carefully inside the cloth, he placed it in the middle of the table.

"You simply twirl the cylinder. You cannot see which chamber lines up in firing position. There are six chambers. When you put the muzzle to your head and pull the trigger, you have thus only one chance in six of dying."

"It's insane," Michael began.

"Are you afraid?" Lori asked him.

His eyes blazed. "No more than you," he told her.

But no hand reached for the gun.

"In my country," Alexis hurried on, "this game is considered a way to display courage. But for you three it can also be the solution to the problem of your lives. If all three of you play, there can be no further questioning of your courage. If the lady dies, you two men need no longer compete against each other, but can go back to being friends, a team again. If one of you men die, the way is open for the other to claim the lady. She cannot refuse a man who has played Russian roulette for her sake. Come, let us drink to the solution!"

He lifted his own glass, and was pleased when the three, almost together, raised theirs and drank.

Michael reached for the revolver, weighed it in the palm of his hand. "If I had not had so much of that old devil's wine I wouldn't be doing this," he said.

He looked first at Gerald, long and steadily. "My dear friend," he said, "be more careful up there on the wire."

Then his gaze shifted to the girl. Her eyes were wide, soft and moist, glazed with an hypnotic fascination. "My darling Lori," he said, "I love you very much. But if I die, I hope you can be happy with Gerald."

The words were brave and noble, but the voice quavered, the hand trembled, and the flushed face glistened with sweat. He would have faltered, but his impulsive grasping of the revolver could not be undone. He had betrayed himself. The other two waited remorselessly. It was too late now for a choice.

Michael lifted the gun, twirled the cylinder, placed the muzzle to his left ear. His eyes closed, his lips moved. Convulsively, his finger pressed the trigger.

There was only a dull click.

Then when he didn't move, Alexis had to take the gun from his limp hand. He began carefully to wipe it clean with the handkerchief.

Michael smiled weakly. "Well, that was an experience," he said.

The other two remained silent, and it was impossible to tell whether they were relieved or disappointed.

"It is my turn now, I suppose," Gerald said finally.

He took the revolver, fondled it, twirled the cylinder several times. There was a pallor on him, a vision of doom in his eyes.

"Gerald, you're afraid," Michael said suddenly.

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"Leave him alone!" Lori's eyes flashed with angry green fire. "You were afraid too."

"I wasn't!"

"Then you're a liar."

"Didn't I take the gun first?"

"Shut up, Michael!" This came from Gerald in a harsh, cracking voice. "You don't have the wire or Lori to yourself quite yet."

Gerald's hand moved swiftly now. The muzzle of the revolver went to the right side of his head and instantly he pulled the trigger.

Again there was only the click.

Gerald slammed the gun on the table, closed his eyes for a moment, and let himself breathe. Calmly Alexis picked up the weapon and wiped it clean. Then he offered the gun, nestled in the blue handkerchief, to Lori.

She accepted it gingerly, and it seemed big and awkward in her small hand. It was with the same reluctance that she twirled the cylinder. Her breasts rose and fell with her quick breathing.

"Lori," Gerald said, "don't do it. This isn't a game for a woman."

Michael hesitated, but then he agreed. "Don't do it, Lori. You don't have to prove anything."

But it was as if telling her nothing need be proved was the very thing that forced her relentlessly to the proof. "Thank you both," she told them, and she raised the gun, put the muzzle to the side of her head, and with a despairing resolution pulled the trigger.

Click.

Afterward she cried, convulsively, her whole body shaking with the sobs, tears streaming from her painted eyes and staining her face. Alexis pried the revolver from her tightly clenched fingers and began once again to wipe it clean.

It was Michael who first noticed him. "What are you doing that for?" he almost shouted.

"Getting ready for the second round."

"Second round! But how many—?"

"It can't go on indefinitely," Alexis reminded him. He handed the gun across the table. "I believe it's your turn again."

"No!" Michael stood up, recoiling from the weapon. "Haven't I already proved myself? I'm not afraid to die!"

Alexis was stubborn, insistent, pushing the gun farther toward Michael. "It is not merely a question of whether you are afraid to die. You actually want to die. You have shown it on the wire. You laugh at death every day. Laugh at it now, and take the gun."

"No!"

"You want to stop the game?"

"Why do I have to be first again?"

"Because it's your turn," Gerald put in.

Michael whirled on his partner. "I'm not going to be first again!"

"The more turns are taken, the narrower the odds get. There's an

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advantage to being first," Gerald said.

"Yes, but if I'm unlucky, you don't even have to take a turn. If there's so much advantage, why don't you take first turn this time, Gerald? Afraid?"

Gerald came to his feet too, his dark face reddened with anger. "I am no coward. You know the things I do every day."

"Then use the gun!"

They confronted each other, eyes blazing, close to violence. It was the girl who put an end to it. Their flare-up had stopped her tears. She rose, as angry as either of them, but she spoke to Alexis.

"Is this the friendship, the team, that was so wonderful before I came along?" she demanded to know.

Alexis shrugged with an elaborate show of helplessness.

"Why don't you suggest *I* be first?" she asked Michael and Gerald. "Isn't it my daring that spurs you on?"

They stood silent before her. She looked at both of them for a moment, with utter scorn. Then she grabbed her raincoat from a chair, and without bothering to put it on, turned and walked away.

"Here's the money for the wine," Michael said, taking his coat too, and throwing some bills on the table.

"Are you going after her?" Gerald asked.

"Why should I?" Michael walked away, threading among the tables.

"Alexis," Gerald said softly, "you're a sadistic devil." He drained what wine was left in his glass, then he departed too.

Alexis went to the matinée performance that day. He sat in the highest row of seats, munched caramels, and enjoyed himself tremendously.

The Vandrak Brothers were superb, and so was Lori Anders and her white stallions. Better than ever, Alexis decided. Calm, sure, skilled, professional, flawless. He was thrilled, but the palms of his hands did not sweat. It was a healthy excitement these three brilliant young performers engendered in the audience, not a morbid, subconscious wish to see them fall and die. And Alexis came away happy.

He did not wait for them to appear at his little bistro that evening, because he knew they would not. Before he closed up he drank a toast to their absence.

He sipped the sweet wine and laughed silently to himself. The revolver—that fearful revolver—every young lieutenant who joined the regiment had had to play the game. Alexis had been forced to play it himself, so many years ago—to prove his courage. Then afterward they had shown him—the revolver's firing pin had been filed off. It was impossible to explode a cartridge—the gun was harmless. He had taken it as a souvenir of the war—of defeat.

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a *NEW* mystery story by

VINCENT CORNIER

Except for two short-shorts, it is more than 15 years since we've published a new story by Vincent Cornier. So it is with special pleasure that we welcome Vincent Cornier back to EQMM with a fascinating legal detective story about a case that took 30 years to solve. Now join a Judge, a Bishop, and a Professor (medical) in the sacrosanct Annexe of the Prothenæum Club in London's West End and nibble at what the author calls a "Machiavellian mystery" . . .

THE PRECEDENT

by VINCENT CORNIER

BY LONG ESTABLISHED CUSTOM there was an old and paneled chamber in the Prothenæum Club reserved for members who wished to insure strict seclusion. The sight of one or more men moving up the shallow steps to this room was a signal to all other clubmen present that they were "in Annexe" and must not under any circumstances be disturbed.

Now, on this autumn night, with the subdued snore of London's West End sounding like a lazy sea outside, two elderly men walked up to The Annexe, entered it—and made Prothenæum Club history.

One was John Burbank, Bishop of Lancsingham, and the other was Sir Humphrey Inglesant who was tipped by the legally knowledgeable as a future Lord Chief Justice. Since, in a quarter of a century's membership, these two men had barely exchanged a dozen words, and even on this night had dined separately, piquancy—if not downright mystery—reigned.

"Just stood up, looked at one another, nodded, and there they go," murmured an elegant old hawk of a clubman around whom disciples began to cluster. Professor Alexander Baines—The Gazeteer, as they nicknamed him—could always be relied on to peddle past histories or enlarge on modern instances. "And to the best of my knowledge they have deliberately avoided one another from early manhood." He grunted. "Also they have completely ignored me. Yet there was a time when the three of us were bosom friends—at school and at Varsity."

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Chairs moved and a semicircle formed. It was evident that The Gazeteer was in the mood to deliver one of his notorious candors of reminiscence.

"The split-up dates from the time of Sir Jeremy Westmacott's death, some thirty years ago. He was knocking on for sixty-five and might well have attained his nineties, in my considered medical opinion, except for two things. He quite suddenly developed a baffling heart condition and he ended with a most curious accident in the hunting field."

Listeners looked at one another: they knew how precisely The Gazeteer could employ words—of significance.

"Some of you may recall Mad Jeremy, at least by reputation," Baines went on. "He was a distinct throwback to the Hellfire Jack squires of the Eighteenth Century. Hunted a hard Yorkshire country; rode like a demon; shot, fished, climbed crags, and swam in winter ice waters. And he fêted, drank, and gambled to hell and gone. Eventually, at fifty-two, he married the Errant Heifer—"

"The *what?*"

"Sorry about that! Slipped out." Baines gloomed at his cigar. "However, that was once the sobriquet of the famous musical comedy star who called herself Rosalie Delrayne —christened Harriet Amelia, surnamed Hogben."

There was a stir of interest. Few, being Londoners, were familiar with Hellfire Jack squires; but all, being Londoners, recollected the luscious Delrayne.

"When Jeremy married her she was a divorcee with a thirteen-year-old son, Osbert. He was a handsome but effeminate creature. By Jeremy's former marriage he had two lovely children, boy and girl twins—Roland and Ursula—nine-year-olds. Yet Jeremy inflicted that mongrel Osbert on his household!

"The Westmacott ménage speedily became an unhealthy mishmash, I assure you. That damned woman slowly reduced Jeremy to moral ruin. And her darling Osbert helped dear Mommy in the process."

The Gazeteer's audience was surprised. Baines, as a raconteur, was usually objective and urbane and without a trace of viciousness. Now he was vengeful, with an odd undercurrent of spleen and associated fury.

"A most offensive setup—La Delrayne, slimy Osbert, and his eccentric stepfather." Then Baines let the hare go free. "I know. I was not only Jeremy's doctor, I was his only nephew."

He sighed. "The most terrifying aspect was the way in which Delrayne and her brat undermined Jeremy's love for the twins. They had cost him their mother's life—she died in childbirth—and he had loved her desperately. His former adoration of her image, manifest in

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both of them, was now ended. La Delrayne tyrannized over him, yet he drooled over her, day and night. Whatever evil that gutter creature accomplished, I cannot say—probably she held Jeremy to ransom for her favors. But this I know, she got him to will the major part of his money to herself and her brat.

"She couldn't touch the entail, of course, The title and the Hall were the inheritance of young Roland. Yet, in those pre-War days, farmers did not ride in plush Rolls-Royces and smoke Corona Coronas. Farming was distressed and landlords often ended in bankruptcy courts."

Into the enthralled silence The Gazeteer suddenly jerked a seemingly irrelevant question. "Ever hear of daturine? Know anything about it and its side effects?"

None knew and all said so.

"Told you that Jeremy suddenly found himself with an erratic and dangerous heart condition. Well, I discovered he was taking capsules, imported from South Africa, supposedly aphrodisiacal, and recommended to him by his ever-loving wife. I had a few analyzed. They had been crudely compounded by Indian medicine wallahs and contained the poisonous alkaloid of daturine stramonium—'thorn apple salts'—indubitably the cause of the old man's heart going groggy. As his medical adviser, naturally I told Jeremy."

The Gazeteer laughed—a furiously triumphant sound. "That shattered the establishment! There was an inferno of a row. Jeremy, always so proud of his superb health, suddenly realizing he was probably crocked beyond redemption, tore that bitch to shreds and tatters. Pity that he didn't do it physically."

He looked across at the closed doors of The Annexe. "Jeremy had no subtlety. I had to play a lone hand without his knowledge. Mr. Justice Inglesant"—he nodded at the doors—"so soon, if informed rumor is correct, to be created Lord Justice of Appeal in Ordinary, was then a startlingly successful barrister. Roland, in his twenties, was up at Cambridge reading Law. It seemed perfectly natural for him to invite our mutual friend, Humphrey Inglesant, to the Hall."

Baines licked his lips. "Delrayne was outsmarted for once. Had I called in Jeremy's ponderous old lawyer, she would have suspected something. Never occurred to her that an amiable young barrister could draw up a will just as effectively.

"La Delrayne was away with her latest gigolo when Jeremy hunted for the last time. Scores saw the accident. He was riding hard when suddenly he dropped reins. His face stiffened and he simply slithered out of his saddle. He was kicked in the ribs and lay there."

The Gazeteer paused. "Fortunately he was not killed. They got him to bed and I was called. His

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cracked ribs wouldn't have finished him—he'd endured much worse—but his heart began to fail, disastrously."

He looked around at them. "Jeremy knew he was in for it. With Inglesant and John Burbank present, a new will was drawn up in the bedroom. Delrayne and her son lost almost a quarter of a million pounds by that testament. The pair was left with thirty thousand and bloody good riddance, or legal words to that effect. The twins inherited—"

Into the pause walked the Prothenæum Club's senior steward. He halted deferentially.

"Professor Baines—if I may interrupt."

"Yes, Robins, what is it?"

"Compliments of the Bishop of Lancsingham and Sir Humphrey Inglesant, sir, and would you please join them in The Annexe?"

Professor Baines whitened and drummed his fingers. Then he said, "Bring me my usual brandy, Robins. Tell the gentlemen I am engaged for a few moments. I'll join them shortly."

Carefully, silently, The Gazeteer drained his brandy. Then he stepped toward that cloistered nook wherein, he suspected, he must unburden himself of the most deeply held secret of his professional life.

The Bishop was seated, staring at the fire. The Judge stood, his face rigid and expressionless. Professor Baines had seen it exactly like that—before the pronouncement of a death sentence. He felt his legs wavering and was glad of that drink.

"I have a feeling," he murmured, "that I should sit down." He sat. "And now do we go back to the day of my uncle's untimely end?"

The Judge's face relaxed.

"Thank you, Baines. That helps. You were always phenomenally swift at cutting Gordian knots and arriving at decisions. It would appear that you exercised it—shall I say, momentously but questionably—on the very day you have mentioned."

"Did I? So long ago, I forget—"

"I warn you, do not temporize. We are met here to get to the bottom of a mystery that has oppressed two lives, and you are not at liberty to prevaricate one iota."

Baines got to his feet. "I am a free agent. You'll not talk to me like that, Inglesant! So I'll bid you a very good evening—"

The Judge smiled like a mask. "Now hear me. I make formal declaration that I am in chambers, and with all the powers of State and Law behind me, am intent on conducting an investigation *in camera*. So leave at your peril. *If* you go, or refuse truthful replies to my questions, you may speedily discover other legal machineries at work. They will not be pleasant."

Sweat broke out on the Professor's forehead. The cunning of the move unnerved him. Inglesant had him in a legal trap.

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"I shall not demand evidence on oath from you, Professor Baines. Yet rest assured that if you attempt evasions or if I find you in palpable falsehoods, this confrontation ends, only to be resumed in another place."

Baines felt his lips cracking. "What do you want to know?"

"First of all, about those capsules supplied to the late Sir Jeremy Westmacott: did you at any time suspect his wife of a sustained attempt to poison him?"

"I did. What's more I told Jeremy shortly before his death of my suspicions. That caused the flaming row—"

"I shall tell you when I want amplification of statements. Secondly, why did you so urgently demand that Roland Westmacott visit the Hall, bringing me with him? The father did not know?"

"No. I arranged it. I had a definite purpose."

"Please state that purpose."

"I knew Lady Westmacott was leaving almost at once on one of her 'holidays' and I counted on being able to influence my uncle into making a new will while she was away."

"Laudable—all the circumstances considered," Inglesant conceded. "Now tell me, had I not accepted Roland's invitation and visited the Hall, what other strategy or form of coercion would you have used to gain your ends?"

The Professor smiled sardonically. "Rosalie Delrayne is long in her grave," he said, "but my casebooks and private files remain very much alive. They are at your disposal. You will find on record that I had systematically noted every phase of the suspected daturine poisoning. Had you and Roland not turned up and had Jeremy refused to make a new will in favor of the twins, I should have gone to the police."

"Baines, I confess I am impressed and convinced. Again I thank you. Now, let us move on to the time of Sir Jeremy's death. Would you agree that the old man was impelled to have me draw up his last will and testament by fear of death alone?"

"No, not alone. Before you entered the bedroom I reminded him how Rosalie Delrayne had contrived to get the vast majority of his estate in funds and how dire the fate of the twins would be if he did not make a new will. I warned him I intended to furnish evidence to the police if he refused. Finally"—and Professor Baines looked up defiantly—"I told him that he would be dead in an hour or so."

Sir Humphrey Inglesant lost his glacial mien. "You dared do that!"

"Jeremy had always lived face to face with realities." The Professor smiled thinly. "You tell me I have the faculty of cutting Gordian knots. Dying, I determined to cut the knot which held him to the Delrayne woman."

"I see." Inglesant pondered. "Then we were called into the

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death chamber. Curate and barrister—Church and Law."

"Precisely. Quartet completed with doctor and nurse."

Baines wondered at the sudden exchange of glances between the Bishop and the Judge. Then a monitor in his mind instantly informed him that mention of the nurse was crucial.

"Ah, yes, Nurse Pemberton," Inglesant murmured. "Five days ago she also died." He bowed toward the Bishop. "I defer for a time to you, Burbank."

"Professor Baines"—and the rich tones of the Prelate were welcome after Inglesant's hard voice—"as you may well remember, thirty years ago I was a supremely happy man. I was in love with Ursula Westmacott. Within a fortnight of her father's death I had to renounce all hope of marrying Ursula and was prohibited from telling her why that renunciation was necessary."

Baines twisted irritably. "Is all this germane to—"

"Silence, Baines!" Inglesant almost snarled. "You will hear John Burbank's story without further interruption."

"The reason for the sudden change in my life was caused by the late Nurse Pemberton's turmoil of conscience at that time. She had endured several days of mental agony, then came to me. Under seal of the confessional I listened to a dreadful thing—an accusation against yourself. More, by innocent participation on Inglesant's part and mine, we all were involved—"

"Particeps criminis," interrupted the Judge. "If the tale told by the late Nurse Pemberton was true, if she were not mistaken in what she observed and believed, then you, Baines, as principal, and we as accessories committed a heinous and criminal act at Westmacott's deathbed."

"Bit late in the day, isn't it, to bother about it now?"

"A week ago," the Bishop went on, "I heard that Nurse Pemberton was dying and asking to see me. I visited her. This time she repeated her story outside the sacred confidence of the confessional. Also, she demanded I seek out 'that wicked man'—you—and give you a message. It was this: for the sake of the Westmacotts she had held her peace for thirty years, but she wanted you to know that—that—"

Seeing the Bishop was overcome and had put shaking hands to his face, Inglesant took over thunderously, "Nurse Pemberton said that Sir Jeremy Westmacott was already dead when we two witnessed his signature on the will and that you, Baines, by distracting our attention in a pretense of giving him stimulus from a crushed amyl nitrate ampoule, held in gamgee tissue under his nose—urging us vehemently to sign as witnesses and get it over, because you felt he was dying—committed us to false witness and the

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production of an illegal and criminally obtained document. The woman swore she saw you holding Westmacott's hair at the back, moving his head to simulate life in him—"

To their stupefaction Professor Baines laughed. "Life in him," he quoted. "I simulated nothing. Life *was* in my uncle Jeremy when you two witnessed that will. Now, Church and Law, chew on that!"

"You deny Pemberton's story?"

"Not on your life! Damn it, she was a most observant woman! Everything she told you was true. I *did* move his head. I *did* exhort you to sign. I *did* distract your attention —for a purpose. My faculty for coming to lightning-like decisions, on which you remarked, was never better shown than in that deathbed scene."

Baines discarded his ghoulish glee and somberly said, "Yet, when you witnessed the will, life was in my uncle. Now you've heard me say it twice, maybe you'll end this damnable inquisition."

"There remains a matter of proof," the Judge persisted. "I do not understand your quite extraordinary attitude. But the inquiry will not end, not yet. Now we'll get down to causes. And the onus of proof is on you."

Inglesant looked across at the Bishop, sadly, and continued, "Unless you can fully substantiate your statements and convince us that no law was broken, John Burbank's career, as well as my own, must end tonight. We shall both retire into private life."

Professor Baines, thoroughly shocked, scrutinized the two men—one austere and ascetic, with mild brown eyes, the other a dark and even somber embodiment of power, gray of eye and with a grayish mouth leveled in determination. One had deeply loved his cousin Ursula. The other, both at school and University, had been a boisterous game-for-anything chum. Now he realized that their futures lay in his hands. And he was far from sure what decision he would make.

The tension broke. "All depends on how good at Law you are, Inglesant," Baines remarked oddly.

"What am I supposed to gather from that?"

"Damn it all! Matter of fact, I slipped into letting my voice reveal my thoughts. Bad habit of mine."

"You fully appreciate what I have just told you? If so, you do not appear at all impressed." Inglesant glowered.

"I am to this extent. I understand the motives prompting you. Also I respect an integrity far beyond anything I am capable of."

Inglesant shook his head. "Baines, you are the queerest compound of elements I have ever encountered. Often, as a boy and a young man, I have debated whether you are a devil or a saint."

"Justice is stony-hearted, blind,

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and entirely dispassionate," Baines declared. "That being so, don't try an oblique appeal to my better nature. It won't work. Get on with your Law."

"Very well. You have admitted, Baines, that the testimony of the late Nurse Pemberton was true. You have admitted acting in every way she said you acted at that deathbed. She has sworn that Westmacott was dead. You deny that. Can you prove your denial?"

"I said that, at the moment of witnessing the will, life was in Jeremy Westmacott. That's enough." Again he was possessed of satanical glee. "Anyway, whether Jeremy was dead or not, whether you altruistic and eminent beings were tricked or not, the twins would still have inherited. I had already decided on *that,* you see."

The Judge and the Prelate looked at one another in bewilderment. Was Baines lost to normal reason? Was he mad? For surely no sane man could juggle with acknowledged facts as he did.

"Baines, explain yourself." The Judge was thundering again.

"So you are asking for amplification of a statement, eh?"

The Judge accepted the jibe.

"Very well. Jeremy, realizing he had been tricked into taking deleterious narcotics, took no more. But daturine, like digitalin, is one of the most insidiously cumulative of the alkaloid poisons. Irremediable damage had already been done."

"You imply—"

"I imply nothing. I merely state fact. Jeremy had drunk a lot of whiskey before going on his last hunt. He had eaten only a sandwich. Remember, Jeremy had never before been unseated in the field. Yet, on a fast run across stubble, people saw him reel and slip sideways from his saddle. A following horse kicked in his ribs and there was *finis.*"

"You mean the rib injuries were fatal in themselves?"

"No, he died of heart failure. In my considered opinion, excitement, violent exercise, and that half bellyful of spirits cooked his goose. A residue of daturine had built up in his system. That whiskey triggered it—narcosis supervened; he momentarily lost consciousness, fell, was knocked out—so he died."

"You have said your casebooks and private files still record, in detail, your observations on the taking of these capsules and their effects?"

"Exactly. I repeat, they are available to you." Baines harshly drew in his breath. "The final entry, in red ink, might be of greatest interest to you. It says: A diabolically successful murder."

"*Murder?* Are you aware of what you are saying?"

"I am."

"You will not qualify by saying 'in my opinion' a murder was done? Now be very careful! You will know what *I* could say to you."

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"Pooh! If you said it I shouldn't heed it any more than I would wind in a riddle. I was no accessory before or after the fact of murder. At least, not in *my* opinion."

"Your clear duty, at that time, was to go to the police and give information."

"Duty, my Aunt Fanny! You've let Law go to your head, Inglesant! I knew my duty. It was to two innocents, Roland and Ursula Westmacott. I had to save them from the scandal that would besmirch the Westmacott name for generations."

"You appear very certain your records would have been accepted by the authorities."

Baines had had enough. "Cut it, Inglesant. Let's have a showdown. I began by telling you that had the will not been made, the twins would have inherited anyway. Simple: had Jeremy *not* made it, my hand would have been forced. I should have withheld the certificate of death and demanded an autopsy, in fullest confidence that post-mortem findings would fully incriminate La Delrayne. Those, and my painstaking notes, would have sent her to the gallows. In those days a woman poisoner never escaped the rope." He spread his hands. "A felon cannot inherit from his own deed, as you well know."

Into the hushed room came a sigh, followed by a strangely plaintive utterance by the Bishop.

"Alexander Baines, in the name of God and before me, His ordained priest, would you take oath and declare these things you have said are true?"

Professor Baines astonished them: solemnly and reverently, he took that oath. Then he quietly said, "This is binding on every word I have spoken to you. I alter nothing, I retract nothing."

"What," ruminated the Judge, "is our position now?"

Baines was in the ascendancy. "The case is altered—what?" But no longer was he mocking.

"Indeed it is altered," Inglesant admitted. "I find myself in—"

"Bluntly speaking, in one hell of a mess! Now may I take it upon myself to demand that a Judge be *just?*" His eyes sparked. "Carefully, and within your powers, you prepared and sprung this trap on me. The reasons you gave were valid. I confess, when I learned you both had decided to retire into private life rather than endure the shattering state caused by Nurse Pemberton's dying message, I recognized an ethical nobility greater than anything I could ever claim."

Inglesant bowed and actually smiled. "That is very graceful of you, Baines. Yet, tell me, in what way am I being unjust?"

"By sustaining this inquiry *in camera*. By holding me in a legal trap. Twice I told you that nothing unlawful was done when you witnessed Westmacott's will. Further, I have sworn it under oath. I repeat, it is now unjust to continue."

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After a few moments of hesitation the Bishop of Lancsingham said, "In that I concur. Inglesant?"

The Judge deliberated a second, then acted positively. He pressed the bell. When Robins appeared he said, "We wish to drink, Robins—"

"What I'd like to know," Baines asked, "is why you two fellows so suddenly avoided one another, and myself, shortly after Nurse Pemberton's confession. It was quite impossible for any revelation made in that confession to be communicated. Then why the breakup?"

"I told Humphrey I had terminated my engagement to your cousin Ursula and intended for some considerable time to go into retreat. My reasons, I told him, were grave." Pensively the Bishop looked into the gold of his sherry. "I also stated that the gravity was sufficient to make it imperative that we three sever all contact with each other."

"Knowing me," smiled Inglesant, "you will realize that I immediately attributed the responsibility to you, Baines. After all, you were fundamentally a Westmacott, and over many generations that family has earned the devil's own reputation."

"Admittedly. Scruples have rarely deterred a Westmacott. For all that, you cannot point to one who was a rogue." Then Baines said a strange thing. "Thirty friendless years . . . the pyramids are also built on sand." He sipped his brandy. "However, we still have a problem."

"And are no nearer its solution," Inglesant remarked. "Out of earlier friendship—forgetting the span of years—will you please help us?"

"To continue in the ways we have determined," the Bishop intoned, "or to go out of this room emancipated of the fear of guilt."

"Right! Consider the slate cleaned. I can help you and I shall." Baines looked at each man in turn. "Provided the initiative now passes to me. It is my turn to ask questions and demand unequivocal answers. Agreed?"

It was agreed.

"Recall this: the late Nurse Pemberton stated that I distracted your attention. Jeremy was already dead, she said, when I crushed an ampoule of amyl nitrate and held it in gamgee tissue under his nose. Does either of you know the smell of that drug?"

Both did. The Bishop mentioned pear drops beloved of their schooldays. Inglesant mentioned nail polish and film cement. And both agreed it was a pungent scent.

"Did either of you detect that smell in the death chamber? You, with your photographic memory, Inglesant, did *you?*" Both agreed there was no such smell.

"But," said Lancsingham, "I distinctly recollect you asked Pemberton to pass you the things. They were small silk-covered glass cylinders in an oblong brass case."

"Quite correct. Westmacott had just signed his will. It was on a

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leather writing tablet and I passed it to you with a request that you both witness at once—time was very short. As I did this, Pemberton handed me the ampoules. Remember I was on the right side of the bed, near the half-opened window. A small table carrying a shaded lamp was also there." They recalled this was so. "With his wary lawyer's eye, Inglesant glanced at Westmacott to insure he could see the witnessing."

"That is quite correct. His lips were puffing air, so I knew he still lived. And I began to append my signature."

"At that precise moment," Baines declared, "I slipped my right hand behind his head and held the tissue over his lower face with my left hand. You finished writing, handed the pen to Burbank, and all was completed." He grunted. "Had I given him an inhalant of amyl, it would have been too late."

"Too late?" Inglesant's hands trembled. "Then he *was* dead—"

"Too late for stimulants to help him," Baines suavely stated. "But I assure you, life was still in him."

"That reiterated phrase—"

Baines looked at the Bishop. "It is strictest legal terminology." Inglesant nodded. "However, let's get on. You may recall that in my haste to minister to the old man I knocked that lamp shade to one side. The full glare of the bulb shone straight on him as I said, 'Well, you were just in time—he's gone'."

"And quite calmly you straightened the shade."

"I did. Then I threw the gamgee out of the window, drew the sheet over Westmacott's face, inspected the will—and washed my hands." His eyes fascinated them. "Pontius Pilate established that precedent."

Judge and Bishop were deadly in their immobility.

"Precedent," Baines mused. "Curious word. Tell me something about it, Inglesant." Then as the Judge was about to speak, Baines stopped him. "I particularly want to know if I am correct that in Law a precedent is the decision of a higher or a supreme court, cited as absolute authority for the decision of similar legal facts at a later date. That a judge is *bound* to observe judicial precedents."

"Certainly," Inglesant said. "Providing he is judging a case based on facts exactly similar to those earlier ones decided on by a higher court, then he is in legality and practice bound to follow the *ratio decidendi* of that previous case. His duty is inescapable."

Professor Baines put aside his cigar and finished his brandy. He looked at the Bishop.

"John Burbank, tell me this; if, a few moments from now, Mr. Justice Inglesant decides that no legal wrong was done by me at Westmacott's dying, will you accept his decision as binding?"

"I will!" The Bishop smiled. "I—I feel curiously exalted. It is as

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though I have already been given promise of—shall I be prosy and say —an issue out of my afflictions."

Whereas the priest of God revealed his faith, the Master of Law was instantly hardened by suspicions of some final trickery. "Out with it, Baines," he growled. "This is the end of the road."

"Earlier I unwittingly spoke private thoughts aloud. 'All depends on how good at Law you are, Inglesant'—and indeed it does!" He sighed. "When you looked at Westmacott and saw the feeble puffing of his lips, I knew it was his very last breath. A moth was on that lamp shade. I whipped it off, held it in that gamgee tissue, and placed it in Jeremy's open mouth."

Baines spread his arms. "There you have it in downright simplicity. When you witnessed, life was in Jeremy Westmacott. That will was perfectly legal."

"How *dare* you say that?" Inglesant was on his feet, his face purple. "My God, to think we have endured so much only to—"

"I dare say it because it has been established in Law. 'Way back in the Eighteenth Century a similar case occurred. A swift-thinking legal man caught a fly and held it in the mouth of a dying testator while two signatories witnessed the man's will. After various squabbles at Law the whole thing blew up in the House of Lords. And the lords spiritual and temporal decided that the exact terms of the Law had been fulfilled: 'life was in the man when the document was attested'." He laughed. "Remember what you have just told me about precedents."

The Judge had slumped into a chair. He was muttering to himself. "Of course, of course! It comes back to me. Can't quote it, but I'll find it right enough." He looked up. "Baines, you cunning devil! You are right. It was among the legal curiosities I studied in my earliest days."

"It establishes a precedent—that is all that matters. Now, shall we say *quod erat demonstrandum?"*

Gently the Bishop asked of Inglesant, "What are your findings, Humphrey? Yours is the decision."

"Professor Baines did nothing illegal. Law being Law, by established precedent he is entirely exonerated." He nodded his leonine head. "However questionable some of your tactics were, Baines, I cannot deny you immense credit for your final act." He laughed shyly and held out his hand. "Alexander, after thirty years . . ."

Down on the floor of the Prothenæum Club the oldest member glared in outrage at Robins ascending the steps of The Annexe, laden salver in hand.

"Really! In all my long association with the Prothenæum Club I have never known people drink in The Annexe." He snorted at his cronies. "I sincerely trust we are not witnessing the establishment of a precedent!"

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A murder so unusual that we dare not tell you a single thing about it . . .

TIME BOMB

by WILLIAM BANKIER

THE FIRST TELEPHONE CALL CAME in at precisely 10:37 on Monday night. Shorty was able to remember because he had just read the Harland Used Car spot and all commercials were logged at their exact time of delivery.

The police kept track of all the calls after that first one and did their best to trace them, but none of the calls lasted long enough.

Shorty Shrift had started out as a disc jockey. He was good at it. He could turn his mouth on and let it run while his hands cued up records or shuffled commercial copy and album covers. He was familiar with all the recording artists and their personal histories and made it sound as though he was on intimate terms with many of them. Actually, Shorty had never been more than 150 miles from Baytown and the only star he had ever spoken to was Jimmy Dorsey. The band came through on tour and Shorty taped a ten-minute interview with the leader.

Lately, his program had been changed in format, following the lead of some of the metropolitan stations. Now he played a lot less music and spent most of the time talking to listeners on the telephone. This suited Shorty's personality even more than the inane banter of the dj fill-ins. He didn't care what he said to people and he had been a first-rate needler since his childhood.

Better still, Shorty could swallow it when somebody turned the conversational tables on him—which happened occasionally because people loved to prepare a good argument on the night's topic and then call in and unload it on Shorty.

"I dish it out," he would say after hanging up on the proud shafter, "so I have to be able to take it."

On this particular Monday night the show had begun as usual with the brassy theme song and the recorded announcer saying, "For the next two hours the Open Line Show where your calls tell it all. And now, to scorch your ears and put you down in his own unmentionable manner, I give you—Shorty Shrift!"

The subject that night, one of Shorty's favorites, was religion. Although he had not been to church in a decade, Shorty enjoyed coming

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on as a true believer, a position of righteousness from which he could lash out at any free-thinking liberals who might call in.

"The thing about some of you," he would say, "is you find it very easy to list what you don't believe in, but I can't get you to explain to me what you *do* believe in."

Or he would toss off one of his little capsule statements that were getting quite a bit of play around town. "What do you mean, there is no God? Who do you think wakes you up in the morning?" A certain well-known minister frequently used one of Shorty's aphorisms as the text for his sermon.

The threatening call was over almost before Shorty realized it.

"Shorty?" The voice, male, was distant and hollow. It might have been disguised.

"Go ahead, it's your dime."

"I'm glad you believe in God. I'll have no regrets about sending you to meet him."

"I don't follow you, friend."

"I'm going to kill you, Shorty. Very soon. I'm going to kill you." And the line went dead.

Shorty laughed it off that night, referring to cranks who should be put where they can't bother people.

The next evening the voice took him up on that point. "I have been away for a while, Shorty, but now I'm out. While I was confined I was wondering how to deal with you. Now I have the answer. I'm going to kill you."

"Why not just turn off your radio, chum?" Shorty was not yet afraid of the caller.

"It isn't the program I object to. This is something I have to do."

"Well, what I have to do is read this commercial."

In this way Shorty was able to use the calls for laughs, and it worked. Within a couple of days the local paper picked up the fact that a noted radio personality was being threatened. Shorty was interviewed in print and managed to go on record as believing that nobody liked him very much but nobody disliked him, so far as he knew, enough to kill him.

The station owner called him in and congratulated him. The show's rating was beginning to skyrocket, the station was jammed with requests for commercial time on Shorty's show, and the owner had been able to raise the rates 20% because of the increased audience. And since the accumulation of money is why radio station owners own radio stations in the first place, Shorty's hair had never been fairer.

"Tell me the truth," the owner said, the spotlight concealed in the ceiling above his desk glittering on his rimless glasses, "is this a hoax? Did you line somebody up to put in those calls?"

"No. It's on the level."

"I don't care if you did cook it up. I think it's brilliant."

"It's for real. This guy wants to kill me."

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The caller announced his method that night. "Don't look for me on the street," he said. "You'll never see me. I'm going to kill you with a bomb."

"I better start looking under the hood of my car."

"Not on the street, I said. In the studio. This bomb will kill you in the studio. On the air."

The papers loved it. The audience doubled. In fact, it was hard to find anybody listening to any other radio program between ten and midnight while Shorty Shrift sat at his microphone, waiting to be killed.

The announcer would say, "And here he is, still alive and cackling—Shorty Shrift!"

"Welcome to the shooting gallery," Shorty would open. "This is Mrs. Pigeon's little boy, Clay. Where is my mad bomber tonight?"

Shorty pretended to be taking the threat lightly, but inside he was scared. This guy was persistent. There was something unnerving about his calm statement of purpose. He was going to kill Shorty and that was as sure as taxes.

"I thought public executions went out in the Eighteenth Century," Shorty would say.

The studio, of course, was taking every precaution. All mail, not just Shorty's, was carefully screened with a metal detector. And two private detectives guarded the entrance to the station and the studio whenever Shorty was on the premises. Meanwhile, the front page of the local daily carried a picture of the station manager signing an insurance policy for $1,000,000 covering Shorty's life.

Listeners chipped in with their good advice and much of the telephone chatter revolved about the threatened murder. During these conversations Shorty's apprehension was revealed in an even sharper retort than usual.

"Shorty?"

"Yeah. Go ahead."

"Look, you better watch everything that comes in there. Do you get coffee sent in from a restaurant?"

"Sure. We treat ourselves to a coffee."

"Well, watch it. They got all kinds of little bombs nowadays. Could even hide one in a coffee cup."

"Sure, and that pizza could be a land mine. Does Secretary McNamara know about you? He'd love to have your coffee bomb for the army."

Then somebody phoned and said it could be a cup of sulphuric acid, not coffee. To which Shorty said, "Yeah, sulphuric acid in a paper cup, thanks a lot, buster." Another listener said forget the coffee but watch whatever you eat. Never fear, Shorty replied, the Paragon Café hamburgers have been bombing for years.

The next call was the muffled voice. "Your audience seems to un-

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derestimate my intelligence. I'm going to kill you but not with anything as simple as a bomb in a sandwich. My bomb is much more complex than that. You'll never detect it until it is too late. In fact, get any help you want. Get Leo Lombard of the Bomb Disposal Squad. You'll die all the same."

It was a good idea and Shorty arranged it next day. Sergeant Leo Lombard was well-known in the city as one of the top bomb-disposal experts on the continent. He had defused more than one monster, working near mail boxes, in bank vaults, wherever explosives were planted. And since his work was dangerous and glamorous, the communications media had used him in many interviews and articles. Because of this, or perhaps because of an exhibitionistic nature that had first led him into the work, Leo was glad to be Shorty's special guest for the next few nights.

It gave the show the lift it needed because interest was beginning to wane ever so slightly. Was it all a hoax after all? If somebody was going to blow up Shorty Shrift, his thousands of friends and listeners hoped it would happen soon.

Now with Lombard on hand, they could talk about famous bombings and methods of defusing and the curious variety of amputations and disfigurement that resulted when these methods failed.

Nothing happened during Lombard's first evening in the guest chair and Shorty was able to say, "Well, Sergeant, looks like your authoritative presence here scared our man away."

But on the second night the call came in at 10:30.

"Hello, Shorty, are you ready to go?"

"Not if I can't take it with me, pal."

"I just called to say goodbye. The bomb is there in the studio with you. It will go off in just a few minutes."

And the line went dead.

Sergeant Lombard was out of his chair in a flash, and while Shorty described the action over the air, Leo checked everything in the studio—the furniture, the light fixtures, the underside of the desk, the water pitcher, the microphone itself. He even took a stethoscope from his bag and listened to the walls, floor, and ceiling. It was great. Shorty described it blow by blow, like Don Dunphy doing a world's heavyweight championship fight.

"It's a false alarm," Shorty said finally as a perspiring Leo Lombard sank back into his chair. "It looks as though our bomber is nothing but a pest. He's just out to worry me as much as he can. Okay, friend, you've had your fun. Now kindly drop dead."

The final call came in almost immediately. "Look, Shorty, your life's still short—the bomb *is* there. You just didn't recognize it. The fuse has been set for a long time—for

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years—and it's been ready to explode ever since."

"You're not making any sense, chum."

"Yes, I am. I'm talking about years ago because that's when it started. I told you to let me drive. I said you're drunk, Shorty, but you got behind the wheel anyway."

A flash of recognition jolted Shorty's brain. He knew the voice now.

"Is that you, Pete?"

"Yes, it's me, Pete. I guess I sound different. I've been in the hospital and I lost a lot of teeth. I've been thinking all these years. At first I figured I'd tell the police but it was so long ago and the car is gone by now. Where is the evidence, they'd say. So I listened to you every night and I finally decided it was up to me to cause justice to be done. This is justice, Shorty. The bomb is justice."

It was clear now. Shorty could claim it was all a crank accusation, but he would rather not have to face it. He punched the microphone "Off" button and said to the producer through the intercom, "Let's kill this call. This nut is 'way off base."

But the producer said, "You promoted this thing, Shorty. Keep it on. It's great."

With the microphone back on, Shorty could hear the caller saying, "—and when you knocked that woman down, that Mrs. Hatfield, I said, 'Stop the car.' She was still alive, Shorty. If you'd gone back we might have saved her. But you kept on going and we went all the way to Florida. Extended vacation, you said. You never even looked at a paper. You blocked it out of your mind, said you didn't want to know about it. You let it all die, just like she did. And now it's your turn."

A movement caught Shorty Shrift's eye. He turned and saw Leo Lombard moving toward him across the desk, saw the tensed hands reaching for his throat, saw the sputtering fire like a fuse in the widened eyes, felt the shock waves radiating from a man about to explode.

All this Shorty saw and felt in a split second as the caller said, "You never even bothered to find out Mrs. Hatfield's maiden name. Her name was Penny Lombard."

And the very last thing Shorty saw was a flashing light before his bulging eyes as the human bomb went off.

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CRIME COCKTAIL

1 part Homicide
1 part Fantasy
1 grain Salt

Shake in cracked ice. Add dash of bitters or top with twist of lemon peel according to taste. Garnish with sprig of the Absurd, and serve in champagne glass.

A CASE OF JURISDICTION

by JOHN PIERCE

WITH ONE ROUND THEY GOT Rex Dexter through the forehead.

Regan saw it. He had opened his eleventh can of Brunerhoff's and was lighting a Titan-M triple-king (his twenty-seventh), and there through the rocks came Dexter on his palomino, straining uphill beyond the Wyoming timberline when a bullet whined and the color television set belched flame, glowed white, smoldered, and sputtered out.

Regan threw himself to the floor, spilling his beer and breaking off his cigarette in the middle. He reached to yank the plug from the wall, then, on an elbow, dialed Sheriff Appleby at the station.

"I want to report a homicide."

Then, shaken, he lay dazed in the broken glass and debris. Beer had soaked the television schedule of the Bloomington *Monitor,* blurring the inked underscorings of the Sunday provender: Mid-morning Movie; AFL Highlights; Pre-Game Warmup, Falcons vs. Oilers; NFL Highlights; Pre-Game Warmup, Rams vs. Packers (here his wife had stormed out); Post-Game Wrap-up; Post-Game Wrap-up Highlights; Pro Football Scoreboard; Championship Bowling (Repeat); Whirlybirds (Repeat); and now Rex Dexter, who'd been murdered.

Regan rubbed his inflamed eyes, heard the siren and the tires on his gravel driveway, and pulled himself up. Appleby, a beefy congenial man, entered, followed by Roy Cagle, his deputy. He inspected the charred television set and the room, then heard Regan out.

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"It might be you've missed the point of this thing, Mr. Regan," he said, accepting a beer. "Are you sure there wasn't nobody shooting at *you?*"

"That's a damn fool question," Regan said. "I've got no enemies. Dexter? He'd just that minute finished rustling sixty prime head of horses from the Clyde Oglethorpe spread."

"You can prove that?"

"Sure I can prove it. I sat right here and *saw* him. I watched him do it, him and Brad Bentley in this stampede they set off in Willet's Canyon."

"He's right, sher'f," Cagle said. "I saw 'em just before I left for the stationhouse."

Appleby shook his head and sat down. He contemplated his beer. "It just don't sound like Dexter. Him or Bentley, either one."

Cagle said, "Yeah, but the horses wasn't rightly Oglethorpe's to begin with. He traded whiskey and guns to the Sioux is where he got 'em, and then put his brand over whatever one they was stole from."

"It's still stealin'," Sheriff Appleby said unhappily. He pinched his bulbous nose. "Rex Dexter. I'll miss that scoundrel. I learned many a trick watchin' him."

"Never did use a stunt man," Cagle said. "What I mean, he was all man before he ever *got* to Hollywood."

Appleby thumped his beer can with a finger and turned to Regan. "Suppose you describe just how this happened."

"It's just like I told you," Regan said. "Dexter and Bentley had just cut out these horses and turned them over to the army railhead near Laramie, and here came Dexter riding back—"

"*Army* railhead?"

"It was getting to look like they might be stole U.S. Cavalry horses."

"*Now* we're gettin' somewheres. What you're sayin' is, these guys was some kind of lawmen."

"It was beginning to look that way."

"And that makes it a *cop* killin'. Now we *are* gettin' somewheres. Describe this Oglethorpe."

Regan thought. "Six foot. Black shirt. Mustache."

"And them mean little shifty eyes when he dealt cards," Cagle said.

"I see," breathed Appleby. He put down his beer can and circled the room. "And you say it didn't tell you where this Oglethorpe was at the time, but right here's this hole in your window screen. Draw a line to the TV, look back this way, and up there's where the sucker is—right up in them woods along the rise."

"He *can't* be," Regan said. "He's 'way off in Wyoming. Not five minutes before that shooting he was sitting in the back room behind the saloon, drinking whiskey and talking to his boys." His voice faltered as he glanced at Appleby, whose face was

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contorted in a terrible grimace. "That's what's so aggravating," Regan added. "How am I ever going to know?"

"Didn't you tell me," Cagle said, "didn't you say, Mr. Regan, you bought a portable TV set for your bedroom for your wife's birthday?"

"God almighty." Regan clapped a hand to his forehead. "Run get it, Roy. Run up there and bring it down while I unhook this antenna wire."

With Appleby he pushed the smoldering hulk of the color set aside and, arm outstretched with the antenna wire, was waiting like a relay man when Cagle came down the stairs with the set. Frantically they put it on an ottoman, tied in the antenna, plugged into the wall, and worked the dials.

Appleby came in from the kitchen with three beers. Side by side they sat on the sofa, watching intently as the picture focused in. The scene was a bleak western cemetery. They were burying Rex Dexter. A handful of people stood about, and the preacher intoned and tumbleweeds dragged like tired spiders across the hill.

"Audrie Dawne," murmured Appleby. "There's some real little womanhood." He withdrew his pad and pencil, and spoke aloud as he wrote. "Preacher. Audrie Dawne. Brad Bentley. Sheriff. Who is all them other guys?"

"Extras," Regan said. "Nobody important."

"Six extras," he wrote. "Pallbearers, I guess."

Bentley was leading Audrie Dawne down the hill. At her rig he took her hand. She was begging him not to gun down Oglethorpe. "I'm sick to death of killin'," she said vehemently, and Bentley said, "Ma'am, a man's got to do what he's got to do."

"Ain't that the damn truth," said Cagle, and there was a crack, a whine, an explosion, and all three men hurled themselves to the floor, splintering the coffee table and upending their beer. Glass from the picture tube sprayed them and they felt the heat as the flame went from white to orange to blue and then sputtered out.

"They got Bentley!" Cagle shouted, and Regan snapped the cord from the wall.

"Stay down, boys," Appleby said. "Don't nobody move. Roy, you wiggle out to the car radio and tell 'em to bring us my TV set from the station and three men with rifles. Tell 'em—" He faltered. He shook his head. Pinned down, faces in the carpet, they did not notice Mrs. Regan pass in the hallway behind them. She had come down the hill and now disappeared into the cellar with a long narrow object wrapped in burlap. "I can't do it," Appleby said.

"Can't do what?" Regan asked.

"Can't do *nothin'*. I got no jurisdiction in Wyoming—that's six states away."

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"Well, you sure as hell got it here," Cagle said, "and right behind us out that window is where that round come from."

"Shot from right out there and killed in Wyoming," Regan said. "What does that make it?"

"It makes it interstate," said Appleby. "Gimme that telephone, Cagle. Hand it here." He began to dial.

"Who you callin', Sher'f?" Cagle asked.

"Who do you think I'm callin'? Damn it, this case belongs to the F.B.I."

RIDDLE: *A Real Brain Teaser*

by ANONYMOUS

Cut off my head, and singular I act,
Cut off my tail, and plural I appear;
Cut off my head and tail, and, wondrous fact,
Although my middle's left, there's nothing there.
What is my head cut off? A sounding sea;
What is my tail cut off? A flowing river,
In whose translucent depths I fearless play,
Parent of sweetest sounds, yet mute forever.

CHALLENGE TO THE READER

Can you solve the riddle above? (It's a tough one!) The answer is in the original title, which is now given to you upside down—ɑoɔ

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a *COMPLETE* detective *SHORT NOVEL* by KELLEY ROOS

Watch out for the "Watch Out!" girls—the gorgeous, glamorous chorus-girls of the famous Broadway musical . . .

Once a year Bobo Wilton, the perennial bachelor playboy, threw a week-end party for the "Watch Out!" girls in his modernized Spanish mission high on a mountain in New Mexico—and what an annual private ball that was! This year it just happened that our old friend Jeff Troy, professional photographer and amateur detective, and his lovely wife Haila, attended the fabulous show-girl reunion.

The "Watch Out!" girls were still charming and beautiful—visions of feminine pulchritude. But who would dream they would have to watch out for—murder!

THE "WATCH OUT!" GIRLS

by KELLEY ROOS

OUR LADY CHAUFFEUR TURNED the sleek, luxurious station wagon onto Highway 66 and aimed it at the Sandia Mountains. In a few minutes we were out of the flat that the Rio Grande had leveled off for the use of the citizens of Albuquerque. We were on our way to become the week-end guests of certainly the most enthusiastic host in all the Southwest. His name was Bartlett Wilton. Jeff and I had never met him.

On our return trip from a vacation in California, Jeff had dragged me off the train at Albuquerque. He had wanted to photograph a picture story of the Ernie Pyle Library, the small white house with the picket fence that Ernie and his wife had, for such a tragically brief time, called home. That job done, we were having a drink at our hotel bar when we saw Joyce Revere, the great big beautiful movie star, parade spectacularly through the lobby. Jeff had asked the bartender what Miss Revere was up to in these parts and the bartender told him in full.

The gorgeous and glamorous Joyce was in Albuquerque today because twelve years ago she had been a show girl in the Broadway musi-

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cal, *Watch Out!* Its principal backer was a wealthy, stage-struck gentleman named Bartlett Wilton. When Mr. Wilton had fallen collectively in love with the show's line of comely young ladies, no one had blamed him. They had been something, those girls, something to make two out of every three college boys within a hundred-mile radius of New York unfaithful to his Alma Mater, and something to make the boys' grandfathers forget the Floradora Sextet. The *Watch Out!* girls were now a theatrical legend, and Bartlett Wilton was a part of that legend.

Soon after the show's closing, Mr. Wilton had been laid low with an asthmatic condition that made it necessary for him to live every moment in the hot, dry air of New Mexico. Still a bachelor, he had built himself a fabulous house high in the Manzano Mountains. He could never return to the theatrical excitement of New York, but once a year he brought a little of that excitement to him. Once a year he threw a week-end reunion party for the *Watch Out!* girls. They were older now, not the fresh young things they once had been, but to Bartlett Wilton they represented the high noon of his existence.

Almost before the bartender had finished his story Jeff was on the telephone, talking to Mr. Bartlett Wilton. Mr. Wilton was more than pleased with Jeff's idea that he do a camera story of this year's reunion; he was delighted. A car, he said, would be sent for us early the next afternoon.

Miss Marion Briggs pulled the station wagon into a right turn and we were no longer on Route 66. Jeff made a geographical inquiry, and we were both surprised that he received so complete an answer. Miss Briggs wasn't much of a talker.

"This is Cedro Canyon Road," she said. "We're heading south. Fifty miles to go."

"Are you related to Mr. Wilton?" Jeff asked.

Miss Briggs smiled, and for a moment her plain, heavy face lost its masklike quality and came alive. She seemed to have the reticence of a woman who was afraid of being made fun of, as if long ago cruel schoolmates had taunted her about her size and she lived in dread of being jeered at again. She was not quite as tall as Jeff, I had noticed, but she seemed larger. She was stout, but not in the usual jolly, round way. There was something unnatural about her. It was probably the unexpectedness of her sober, retiring nature, which you don't associate with big people.

"No," she said, "I'm not a relative. Mr. Wilton calls me his assistant. I'm his secretary, his housekeeper, his chauffeur. Sometimes he calls me his majorette-domo."

"Mr. Wilton," Jeff said, "sounds fond of you."

"We get along very well," Miss

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Briggs said. "But Mr. Wilton likes everybody."

"Especially," Jeff said, "his old *Watch Out!* girls. How many of them turned up this year for the party?"

"Five," Miss Briggs said. She turned her face back toward the road.

Jeff didn't propel the conversation any farther. He sat mutely beside me, a drooling grin on his face. I knew it wasn't the wild drama of the Western scenery, or the thought of all the gin those juniper trees would make that inspired his fervor. He was thinking of a houseful of mellow-ripe show girls. These ladies would be in their late twenties or early thirties now—in their prime.

I was beginning not to enjoy our vacation so much, and I wondered how our driver felt about her boss's annual jamboree.

You could see that Miss Briggs was not indifferent to her appearance. She had lately been to a beauty parlor, but it must have been the wrong one. She had attempted to become a blonde; she had succeeded only in making her hair a faded mouse-brown. She wore bangs that were creeping too close to her thick-rimmed glasses. It was as if she had made a sudden try for beauty, then abandoned the effort. I wondered if being surrounded for a week-end by such a display of pulchritude would make her unhappy.

We had passed a forest-ranger station, a few small adobe settlements. Now there was nothing near the winding, climbing road except what nature had put there—rugged, angry rock, the lonely, huddling aspen, and spruce and pine. Far away one of the Southwest's quick, sudden storms turned a mountain peak into an island of shadow in the ocean of dazzling sunshine. I could see the lightning dart from the clouds, but there was no sound of thunder.

Abruptly Miss Briggs jerked the car off the paved highway and we jounced up the bumpy floor of a canyon.

Jeff said, "Is this a road?"

She nodded without smiling. "An old wagon trail. We're almost there now."

A moment later we nosed around a great overhanging boulder. I held my breath. The nice boulder didn't fall on us. Then I let my breath out in a gasp. I was looking down across Mr. Bartlett Wilton's palace and at the mountain view behind it.

"We won't be able to tell our friends about this," Jeff said sadly. "It defies description."

Miss Briggs said quietly, "I should like to stay here the rest of my life."

"And the house!" I said. "How could a miracle like that happen?"

"The part near us is an old Spanish mission," Miss Briggs said. "Mr. Wilton built the modern wing."

When Marion Briggs used the

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word *modern,* she meant it. With its walls of plate glass and its brilliantly colored deck-roofs, the house was a shining jewel. There were lawns and gardens, a tennis court and a putting green; as we slipped down below the roof level of the mission, I caught the blue gleam of water in a swimming pool.

Then we were coasting through an arch in the mission wall, into a balcony-studded patio. Jeff unloaded our luggage, and we followed Miss Briggs through what might once have been the dining hall of the Spanish friars. Then, in one step, we found ourselves in another world. I felt like Buck Rogers' friend, Wilma, as we were led across a circular, up-to-the-minute modern hall and into a tremendous living room.

I stopped dead and gaped; I blinked my eyes and looked again. It was true. There was a swimming pool in Bartlett Wilton's living room! At least, there was a part of a swimming pool. The rest of the crescent-shaped pond extended beyond the raised wall of glass into the garden outside.

On an upholstered divan, before an acre of ebony-black coffee table, as if in dry dock, sat a pair of ravishing non-bathing beauties. One was a brunette, still girlish, with a sweetness about her that made the daring of her bathing suit seem just a little shocking. The other was an ash-blonde, and there was nothing girlish about her. She was smooth, she was svelte, she was the sophisticated lady, and, at the moment, she was having something to say.

"Zita, dear," she was drawling, "don't you think you ought to skip this one?"

Across the pool, in the center of an oval bar, another blonde was mixing herself a drink. This was not a Park Avenue blonde; she was quite a way west of Park and seemed to be moving toward Eighth. Right now I'd have put her at Broadway. She was still gorgeous, but the strain of staying that way had begun to tell. There was too much make-up on her face, too much brassy gold in her hair; her figure was a bit too lush. Her carmine-full lips parted in a twisted smile. Then she saw us and she left the critic of her drinking habits unscathed.

Marion Briggs made brief introductions. The young-looking ex-show girl was Betsy Gray, nowadays Mrs. Kendall Crane. Beside her was Mrs. Benedict. I remembered her from the gossip columns, Nicky Benedict's beautiful wife, Claire. The babe at the bar was Miss Zita Allen. They were all glad to meet the two of us; Zita was especially glad to meet Jeff.

Then Miss Briggs conducted us to our room, and after suggesting that we be downstairs for cocktails in half an hour, she went away. Jeff looked around the incredibly sumptuous bedroom and clicked his tongue in disappointment.

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"What's wrong with this room?" I demanded.

"No swimming pool," Jeff said.

"You and Zita," I said, "can swim in the living room. I hope Zita doesn't give the rest of the girls the impression you belong to her and cramp your style."

Jeff took me in his arms and kissed me soundly. But I didn't believe it. I took a shower, then settled down at my dressing table with my make-up case and went to work. This, I knew, was going to be the battle of my life.

"Hurry up, Haila," Jeff said.

"One more minute. Where do you suppose our host is?"

"Probably in the dining room playing basketball. Come on, Haila."

Mr. Bartlett Wilton was in the living room. He was not at all what I expected. As he sat in the midst of his five gorgeous guests, he looked like a proud, daddy-type father holding court with his beautiful daughters. He was a bouncing little man in his middle fifties. This climate was the thing for Mr. Wilton, no doubt about it. His round cherub face glowed with good health. He came trotting toward us, both hands extended. His smile was as big as a welcome mat.

"Mr. and Mrs. Troy!" he cried. "How wonderful to have you here!"

"It's wonderful to be here," Jeff said sincerely.

"It's Jeff, isn't it? And Haila?"

We nodded and from across the room Zita shouted raucously, "Call him Bobo!"

"Now, Zita," our host said, beaming like a boy, "Bobo is so undignified."

"You are Bobo," Zita said. "Our Bobo."

"And we adore you," Claire drawled in her husky, lazy voice.

"You'd better!" Bobo said. "Haila and Jeff, you haven't met all my girls yet. You haven't met Joyce or Shirley."

Bobo introduced us first to the auburn-haired movie star. I had never completely liked Joyce Revere on the screen. On film she seemed too perfect to be true, but in person she was friendly and warm. I immediately forgave her for being so gorgeous.

Then we met Shirley. She was now Mrs. Malcolm Wharton, and Mr. Wharton was undoubtedly a wonderful man. I'd never seen a happier-looking woman than his wife. She couldn't have had a worry in the world; certainly she didn't worry about her looks. In fact, it took more than a little imagination to see how Shirley could once have been one of the famous *Watch Out!* girls.

It isn't hard, of course, for great big girls to become great big fat girls, and all these long-stemmed beauties probably waged an endless battle against the calorie. But not Shirley. Shirley was plump; she was nice and fat. She had some-

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thing none of her friends had, and it made her lovely and attractive in her own way. She shone with contentment; she was relaxed. I liked her by far the best.

"Haila!" Bobo cried. "Jeff! I hope you like champagne."

We both said we did. Bobo was so glad.

"I'm very annoyed with Zita," he said. "This is a champagne time and she insists on drinking her brandy."

"Doctor's orders," Zita said and laughed, too loudly.

Bobo skipped to the bar. "Champagne for the Troys!" he said. "And then I'll tell you my surprise! You won't believe it, you won't!"

While Bobo wrestled joyfully with a cork, the girls chattered away like a bunch of long-separated sorority sisters. Then I noticed that the little sister of the group, Betsy Crane, was moving from girl to girl, whispering into ears. There was a prankish look in her eyes and as each of her friends heard her secret, she nodded and laughed. Betsy came to Jeff and me.

"Bobo always has a terrific stunt for his parties," she whispered. "Trick treasure hunts—things like that. But when he tells us about it, don't be surprised. Act as though it's nothing. Bobo will be furious."

She slipped away from us as our host approached, thrusting tall exquisite glasses into our hands. He circled the room with the bottle; Zita shook her head and helped herself to more brandy. Now it was time for Bobo's sensational announcement. Jeff lifted his camera to record the moment for posterity.

Bobo raised his hand. His guests leaned forward in mock anticipation. Then Bobo showed that he had learned a theatrical trick or two during his semesters on Broadway. He didn't whoop it up; he spoke very quietly.

"Lenna MacLane is coming," he said. "She'll be here tomorrow morning."

There was dead silence. At first I thought the girls were playing Betsy's prank. Then, almost instantly, I realized that everyone was too stunned to speak. Bobo's surprise had been too much for them; Bobo had thrown a bomb. Suddenly they were all talking at once, all shrieking with excitement. I wondered if I had heard correctly. It couldn't be simply that someone named Lenna MacLane was coming. It must be at least Winston Churchill, or maybe even George Washington.

I gathered from the almost hysterical jabbering that Lenna had been one of the *Watch Out!* girls, that nobody had seen her for years and years, and that everyone was just dying to see her again. Everybody, that is, except Betsy. Betsy's initial surprise had not been one of pleasure. As she sat quietly, her lovely young schoolgirl face hardened, I thought, into resentment. She was not dying to see her old

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friend again; to Betsy Crane the news that Lenna MacLane was arriving was definitely not joyous news.

Bobo pounded on the bar, and the questions that were being fired at him came to a stop. "I'll tell you all I know," he said. "Lenna phoned this afternoon. She didn't even need to tell me who it was—she sounded just the same. She said she was in Albuquerque; she wouldn't be able to leave there until two thirty tomorrow morning. She wanted someone to meet her then, at the Hotel Scott, and I said Miss Briggs would. She—"

"Two thirty in the morning!" Shirley exploded. "And she's already in Albuquerque! But why? Why can't she come now, right away?"

"Some business," Bobo said. "Some things she had to do. She didn't say what. Only that she wants to see us all again, even though it's only for a little while. She's taking the noon plane tomorrow."

"Why, she'll practically be here only for breakfast!" Zita said.

"Where's she going in such a hurry?" Joyce asked.

Bobo shrugged. "She said she'd tell us everything when she sees us tomorrow. But isn't it exciting?"

The order Bobo had managed to establish went to pieces; conversational pandemonium prevailed. In the next half hour I heard enough bits and pieces of information about Lenna MacLane to know her strange, sad story.

Lenna, it seemed, had been the most beautiful of all the *Watch Out!* girls. Her loveliness was dramatic—shining hair framing a complexion that was baby-fair, an ultra-divine figure, the poise of a Lynn Fontanne. She had been a young goddess.

The Hollywood boys had swarmed like locusts around Lenna. It was only after they saw they were wasting their time that they noticed Joyce Revere and took her West with them. And if the Hollywood boys didn't know then why Lenna had spurned their offers, they soon found out. Shortly after the show closed she married Clyde Halmont. Clyde's father hadn't quite succeeded in cornering all the money in the world before he died, but he did all right financially. And Lenna MacLane had done all right, too.

Clyde Halmont was a wild young man-about-town, but Lenna seemed to be the girl to tame him. Tragically, she never had much of a chance. Only a few months after their marriage he had been killed.

It was Claire Benedict who told me about the accident. "It was at a picnic party at Bobo's," she said. "He was still living in the East then, you know. And Clyde was drunker that day than usual, and he wandered away from the rest of us. We found his body late that night at the bottom of a cliff.

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"The doctors said that the fall had killed him instantly. It was horrible, of course, and Lenna couldn't seem to get over it. She started drinking too much; she wouldn't see any of us. Then she left New York and we never saw her again, never even heard of her."

"None of us," Bobo said, "ever saw her again."

"I did," Zita said. "I saw her."

"When?" Bobo demanded. "Where?"

"Seven or eight years ago. In Detroit."

"But you never told us!" Claire said.

"I promised Lenna I wouldn't. But now that she's coming out of hiding I guess it doesn't matter." Zita took a long drink of her brandy and soda. "She was working in the line at a crumby club, using a phony name. When I went back to talk to her, she pretended to be glad to see me. But she wasn't. I guess she couldn't stand seeing anyone connected with the old days. That's what drove her from New York, of course. I didn't try to see her again."

"I wonder," Shirley Wharton said, her round placid face wrinkled with perplexity now, "why Lenna would work in a night club. She's heir to all the Halmont money."

"Lenna," Claire said, "was a girl who would do almost anything rather than be idle. She had such energy and so much talent. She wasn't like the rest of us. She was an actress." Claire smiled and shifted her voice back into its café-society gear. "Don't shoot, Joyce darling. You, too, of course. You and Lenna, the two of you had all our talent."

Joyce smiled good-humoredly. "I know exactly how much talent I have. I've seen a few of my pictures. It's my legs, not my acting, that's box office. But you're right about Lenna's acting talent. The only reason I got a movie contract was because Lenna wouldn't go to Hollywood. And now, just think, she's coming here!"

"Does that make all of you?" I asked. "Were there just six *Watch Out!* girls?"

"No," Betsy said, "there were two others. Dixie was killed in a plane crash years ago. And Janice got married, went abroad to live—oh, the summer after the show closed. But that's all of us—the whole line."

Almost as suddenly as if someone had pulled a switch, the living room darkened. A gust of wind rippled the water in the pool. Bobo leaped into action and cranked the glass wall down across the pool, and in a moment a torrent of rain was slashing at it. There was lightning and the roaring rumble of thunder.

Shirley Wharton gave out with her matronly chuckle. "It's a good thing Lenna isn't here right now."

"Why?" Jeff asked. "The storm, you mean?"

"Yes, she'd be under the nearest

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bed. She was terrified of thunder and lightning; we all used to tease her about it. That was strange, too, for Lenna wasn't afraid of anything else in the world."

"I'll say she wasn't," Joyce said. "She was a tough baby, our Lenna. Remember the night she fell backstage and cut her knee? She made the doctor sew her up right there and then. She just gritted her teeth and made cracks about the doctor's lousy needlework."

"And remember the time she and Zita got locked in the theater and—but that's Zita's story. She tells it so funny. Where is Zita? Hey, kids, where's Zita?"

Betsy said, "She was here a minute ago."

"I told her to take a nap," Claire said. "Maybe she's taken my advice."

Shirley lifted her head indignantly. "The way Zita drinks! It's awful. Why does she do it?"

"She enjoys it," Bobo said. "She always did."

"Zita never did have very much restraint," Claire said.

Joyce shook a finger at the group. "Now, now," she said; "you know we can't talk behind Zita's back. We never could. Somehow she always found out about it and put us on the carpet—"

"You bet I did!" Zita could be heard but not seen. Then she popped up in the center of the bar. She grinned at Joyce. "And in a minute I'm putting you all on the carpet. But, first, Bobo, where do you hide your brandy? Is there a secret panel in this bar?"

A shockingly close bolt of lightning turned the air blue. Its partner thunder shivered the glasses on the bar and pummeled our ears. As it died away, we all looked at one another to see if this new sound we heard was actual. Then Jeff was on his feet and racing for the door. We were all right behind him.

The shrill scream that we had heard had spent itself now and only a whimpering sound came to us from somewhere in the old mission. Jeff led us through an arch and turned left into a long corridor that flanked the patio. Then he stopped and bent over the figure on the floor. I heard him shout, "Miss Briggs! What's wrong? What happened?"

He was helping Marion Briggs to her feet. He spoke to her sharply, and in a moment she had pulled herself back into control.

"I—I'm not sure what happened," she said. "Someone pushed me, knocked me down. I was standing here, you see, trying to see if the station wagon windows were closed. I heard a sound behind me and I started to turn. Hands reached out—pushed me—"

"You didn't see who it was?"

"No, I couldn't."

"Which direction did he go?"

She pointed down the corridor, in the opposite direction. "Into that wing, I think."

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Bobo said, "If he went in there, he's still there. This is the only way out."

"I'll take a look," Jeff said, and he was gone before anyone had a chance to volunteer to go with him.

We stood there, all of us, for what seemed hours. Then, just as I was about to organize a searching party for my husband, he was walking back toward us. He was alone.

"There's no one in there," he said. "Whoever it was, Bobo, knows a way out even if you don't."

"But I'm sure I'm right," Bobo said.

"You can't be," Jeff said. "I'll look around outside."

Marion Briggs said, "Mr. Wilton, I'd like to go to my room."

"You're sure you're all right?" Bobo asked.

"I'm all right. I only want to lie down."

"One of the girls will stay with you," Bobo said.

"That won't be necessary, Mr. Wilton."

"But I insist," Bobo said. "I—"

"Mrs. Troy," Marion said, "you come with me."

"Of course," I said.

Marion Briggs's room was near ours, on the same corridor. It was beautifully furnished, but she had done nothing to make it seem hers. There was a military neatness about it. Marion stretched out on the wide bed and I tucked a blanket around her. She closed her eyes, but only for a moment.

She said, "Thanks, but you needn't stay with me, Mrs. Troy."

"Miss Briggs, tell me. Whoever it was that attacked you, was he trying to hurt you?"

She waited until a distant clap of thunder had rolled into silence. She said, "No, I'm sure he wasn't. I think he was only preventing me from seeing who it was."

"Could you tell if it was a man?"

"No, I couldn't."

"Miss Briggs, who's here in this house now? What about the help?"

"It's day help, and all of them are gone now except for the cook and her granddaughter." She smiled grimly. "Neither of them is strong enough to knock me down. Besides, why should they?"

"Has anything like this ever happened before?"

She shook her head. "No, never." She flipped the blanket off her and sat up. "I've got to see about dinner. Nothing must spoil Mr. Wilton's party. He lives all year for this one week-end."

"You stay where you are," I said. "And look. Jeff and I will drive into Albuquerque tonight and pick up Lenna MacLane. You ought to rest."

"Thanks," she said, "but that's my job and I'll do it."

She excused herself abruptly and went into her bath to wash up. I walked down the corridor to our room. From downstairs came the thump of an enthusiastically but badly played piano. A husky voice

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that must have been Zita's was murdering an old blues number. I heard Bobo yelling "Bravo!" and girls' voices shrieking with laughter. Nothing, in fact, was spoiling Mr. Wilton's party.

I found Jeff changing his clothes. He had got himself soaking wet in his outdoor search for Marion Briggs's strange assailant. He hadn't found anyone or anything that could explain the incident, but that, it seemed, had not surprised him.

"If he's still around here," Jeff said, "there are a million places for him to hide. That old mission—someone could hide there for days without being seen. All those balconies and passageways and little rooms."

"Is anyone staying in it?"

"No, it isn't even furnished. Bobo has an idea about making it into a theater, if he can figure out how to get an audience out here. How does Miss Briggs feel about being pushed around?"

"Better than I do. She's her old phlegmatic self again. What do you think about it, Jeff?"

He shrugged. "Maybe it's just the wild and woolly West. If nobody else is going to worry about it, why should we? Let's join the party."

The party zoomed through the evening, and at one in the morning it collapsed like a tired tent. Bobo hadn't needed any help in keeping the champagne glasses filled, but Miss Briggs assisted him, anyway. She was a very conscientious worker; she earned her salary. Although she drank nothing, she was heartily in favor of other people drinking.

I was rather proud of myself. I was the only one of Bobo's guests who got up the stairs without using the banister. It was a good thing that Miss Briggs had insisted on driving to Albuquerque. Jeff was in no shape to have done it, purely and simply in no shape. He fell into bed like a lump of clay.

I was awakened by what I thought was a knock on our door. Enough moonlight seeped through our blinds to show me the way across the room. But the corridor outside was pitch-black.

"Who is it?" I whispered.

"Oh, Mrs. Troy," Marion Briggs said, "I'm so sorry. I bumped into your door in the darkness. I'm sorry."

"It's all right. Did you meet Lenna MacLane?"

"Oh, yes!" There was an enthusiasm in the housekeeper's voice I hadn't heard before. "Oh, yes, I brought her back."

"What's she like? The most beautiful of them all?"

"Far the most beautiful. And she's more than that, too. She's gay and funny and—no wonder they're all so anxious to see her."

"I am, too, Miss Briggs, you be sure I don't miss breakfast."

"I'll be sure. Good night, Mrs. Troy."

Jeff and I both beat Miss Briggs and Lenna MacLane down to

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breakfast, but no one else. We found the rest of the ex-show girls and their host already seated around a huge food-laden table on the sunny patio. There was an air of tenseness about the girls as they waited for Lenna to appear. They were dying to see their old friend again; they were also dying for her to see them as she remembered them—beautiful, glamorous young things.

A lot of work had been done before a lot of mirrors that morning. Even Shirley had gallantly risen to the occasion. I could see by the outline that showed through her white flannel slacks that she had gone so far as to struggle into a girdle. Never before, at such an early hour, had so many women looked so casually, carelessly perfect.

Lenna could hardly be called, at this point, late for breakfast, but Bobo was groaning with impatience. "How could she do this to us? She must know how anxious we are to see her."

"The gorgeous brat," Joyce said, "is building up an entrace for herself." She smiled. "I know I would."

"Or else she's waiting," Claire said, "until this sun melts our make-up and the wind blows our hair off our heads. Then she'll float out here and make us look like dogs."

"She might sleep all morning," Bobo wailed. "And if she really has to catch a plane we'll hardly even see her."

Betsy stood up. In her brief blue shorts she looked like a Junior Women's Tennis Champ. She patted Bobo's shoulder.

"I'm going to drag her down here," she said.

Shirley fluffed her fingers through her brown hair as she watched Betsy lope along the swimming pool and into the house. "Maybe," she said, and there was a wistful note in her voice, "maybe Lenna's changed. After all, it's been years, and people *do* change. I know about that."

"Shirley," Bobo said, "there's a little more of you, but, as for me, there just can't be too much of you. I love you."

Joyce Revere said, "Lenna might look different, but she still sounds the same as ever."

"How do you know?" Zita demanded.

"Lenna woke me."

"Then you've seen her!" Bobo said accusingly.

"No, darling, I only heard her. It must have been when Miss Briggs was taking her to her room. I heard Lenna laugh. It was the same old whoop and holler, as if Miss Briggs had just said the funniest thing in the world. You remember that trick of hers, don't you?"

"The glamor girls," Zita said, "are still imitating her."

Joyce nodded, smiling. "It was good to hear Lenna's laugh again."

"But how could you keep from rushing out to see her?" Bobo demanded.

"Bobo, at four o'clock in the

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morning I wouldn't let my own mother see me. At night the Revere kisser goes into dry dock for repairs. Don't you know about us girls yet?"

It was the sound of the footsteps that turned us all toward the house. They were stiff and stiltlike, as if someone was walking in a nightmare. Then Betsy Crane came out into the sunlight and moved toward us, slowly, carefully, her hands tight at her sides. Her face was gray beneath its coat of tan and her eyes were not seeing us.

"Quick," she said. She tried to say more, her hands rose to her throat as if to wrench out the words, but nothing came.

She crumpled quietly down onto the flagstone terrace.

Jeff was in the house almost before the others had risen to crowd around Betsy, and I followed him, through the cavernous living room, into the circular hall, and up its swirling stairway. We went down the corridor, past our room, on around a corner into a wing. At the end of the wing a door stood half open.

I saw Jeff plunge into that room and then, just as quickly, back out again. He threw up his hands and caught me by the shoulders, trying to turn me away. But he was too late, a moment too late.

I had already seen the body sprawled hideously on the floor, and the heavy brass fireplace tool that had been abandoned beside it. There was nothing but a crimson blotch where the face had been, but I knew from the thick, awkward body in its dowdy clothing that Miss Marion Briggs had been brutally beaten to death.

Late in the afternoon, for the second time that day, Saul Lansing, the county police official in charge of investigating the murder of Marion Briggs, walked into Bobo's house. He looked at the eight of us huddled together in the living room. He shook his head in answer to the question in our eyes.

"No," he said, "we haven't caught up with Lenna MacLane. We haven't even found a trace of her."

It was incredible, but there could be no other answer. Lenna MacLane had murdered Marion Briggs. So far as anyone knew, she had never seen her victim until they had met, at two thirty in the morning in Albuquerque. Yet she had killed her.

For some reason Miss Briggs had returned to Lenna's room after talking to me in the corridor. Lenna had struck her down, beating her violently. Then she had slipped out into the night. She had left no prints on the weapon, nothing of herself behind.

Lansing rubbed his long chin with the back of his hand. "Mr. Wilton," he said, "have you located those pictures?"

Bobo nodded. From his jacket pocket he took a package of snap-

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shots and handed them to the detective. "I've sorted them for you. Those are all of Lenna MacLane. They're only snaps, but some of them are quite good."

Lansing spread them out on the table top. There were twenty-five or thirty pictures of the tall dark girl in shorts, all of them unposed, all stunningly beautiful.

"These were all taken the same day?" Lansing said.

"Yes," Bobo said. "That was my big stunt for that particular party. A picture contest. I gave everyone a little camera and rolls of film. There was to be a prize for the best snapshot, and the funniest, and—oh, lots of prizes. It was a cute idea, I thought."

Lansing was studying the pictures carefully. "You haven't any taken later than these? Anything more recent?"

Bobo shook his head. "No. You see, it was that day that Lenna's husband was killed. She never came to any more of my parties. I never saw her again."

"Well," Lansing said, "if she's still as beautiful as she was then, she can't get far without being noticed. It would help, though, if we were sure what she's like now, if we knew what she was wearing—"

Bobo interrupted him. "The only person in this house who saw her was Marion Briggs. And Marion —" his voice faltered, and he stopped.

Now it was Shirley Wharton who said again what one or another of the girls had been saying all day long: "Lenna didn't do it. I knew Lenna. She wouldn't have murdered—"

"No one believes that anyone they know could commit a murder," Lansing said softly. "Not until after they've committed it."

"But not like this!" Shirley cried. "Not beating her to death like that!"

"Then why," he asked, "do you suppose she ran away?"

"I don't know," Shirley said miserably. Then she lifted her chin defiantly and the softness went out of her round plump face as she challenged the policeman. "But I know she wouldn't kill her like that. And not Marion Briggs. She didn't even know her!"

"Maybe," Lansing said, almost to himself. "Maybe those two did know each other." He turned to Bobo. "Mr. Wilton, you said Miss Briggs had worked for you for about seven months."

"Yes."

"How did you find her? She answer an ad?"

"Nothing like that," Bobo said. "I found her one day doing a painting of the old mission. She was back again the next day. When I discovered she intended returning, I invited her to stay the night. She wasn't an attractive woman, nor especially friendly, but there was something about her I liked. I get lonely here and—well, when she

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asked me if there was anything she could do to earn her board and keep I invented a job.

"She seemed to love this spot so, I really wanted her to stay. As it turned out, she became invaluable. She was my housekeeper, secretary, chauffeur. I don't like a lot of servants about and because of her I was able to get rid of the driver and housekeeper I had. Neither of them was very efficient."

Bobo's voice faltered again. "I genuinely liked her. She was pathetic, perhaps—so ungainly and awkward and uncommunicative—but I'm going to miss her."

"Where did she come from?" Lansing asked.

"She was brought up somewhere in the Middle West. She had no family, at least no one near her. She'd drifted around, working as a waitress—jobs like that. She never spoke much of her past. Not because there seemed to be anything tragic about it, but, I always felt, because it was uninteresting. She was terribly self-conscious. I'm sure her reticence was partly due to her fear of boring people."

"Was she a good painter?" Jeff asked.

"Atrocious," Bobo said. "That was pathetic, too. I think she was always hoping for a miracle, that she had some hidden talent. But it wasn't painting, and she soon knew it and forgot it. She gave her oils to the cook's granddaughter."

Lansing was looking meditatively at Jeff. "Why did you ask that question, Troy?"

"I don't know," Jeff said. He seemed surprised, himself. "Kind of silly, wasn't it?"

"I've been checking up on all of you, you know. Just routine, of course. The New York police tell me, Troy, that you've been of help from time to time to their Homicide Bureau."

"They've never admitted that to me," Jeff said.

"Jeff Troy! Of course!" Claire Benedict said. "I've seen your name in the columns in New York. I never thought of you as a photographer; that threw me."

"I only make a living taking pictures," Jeff said.

"Troy," Lansing said, "what do you think about this Lenna MacLane?"

"I'm wondering about her," Jeff said. "For instance, I wondered how she managed to get away from here. By running off like that she practically admitted that she was guilty of the murder. So why didn't she take one of Bobo's cars?"

"Because she didn't kill Marion Briggs!" Claire said fiercely. "When she left here, she didn't even know that Marion was dead! I can swear that she didn't! I could tell that she didn't know . . ."

Claire's voice trailed off as we stared at her. She lifted a fist to her mouth as if to thrust back the words. She stammered in confusion, trying to explain away the slip.

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"Mrs. Benedict," Lansing said, "you saw Lenna MacLane while she was in this house."

"No, I—"

"You saw her. Did you speak to her?"

Claire saw the angry flush that was beginning to rise in the police official's face. She said quickly, "Yes, I saw her. I spoke to her."

"What time was that?"

"Early this morning. Just before six, I guess; it was beginning to get light. I woke and I couldn't go back to sleep. I was thinking about Lenna and that I couldn't stand waiting till breakfast to see her. After all, I'd been closer to her in the old days than the others and—"

"All right, Mrs. Benedict." Lansing was impatient. "You went to her room. What happened?"

"No, I didn't get to her room. I found Lenna tiptoeing down the stairs. She was completely dressed and had an overnight bag in her hand. I was astonished, of course. She told me she was leaving, that she couldn't bear to see the old crowd again. It would bring back that awful night again, the accident."

"Her husband's death?" Lansing asked.

"Yes. I could see that she still hadn't got over it. In fact, in those few minutes we talked, she almost broke down. She said she was going to walk to the highway and flag a ride back to Albuquerque. She asked me to explain to everyone how it was and then—then she literally ran from me."

"Claire," Bobo said, "you let us sit here at the breakfast table this morning and wait for Lenna to come down. Why didn't you tell us?"

"I promised Lenna, Bobo. She begged me not to tell anyone she'd gone. She was afraid you'd chase after her and try to bring her back."

"I would have, too!" Bobo said. "Unless, of course, you'd told me how unhappy it would have made her."

"What I want to know," Lansing said, "is why you've kept quiet about this after you knew that Marion Briggs had been murdered."

"Because," Claire said hotly, "you're wrong in thinking that Lenna is guilty! I didn't want you to know when she left or how she got away! I wanted to give her more time."

"More time to run away from a murder she didn't commit? It seems to me," Lansing said grimly, "that you're being more loyal to your old friend than logical. Also, you may be aiding and abetting a criminal. You could have helped us, Mrs. Benedict. We needed a description of Lenna MacLane and you could have given it to us hours ago. What is she like?"

Claire looked at him silently, her face hard.

"Claire," Jeff said, "if Lenna is innocent—"

"All right!" Claire said. "She's as

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lovely as she ever was. She looks the same as she did when that picture was taken, almost exactly the same. And she didn't look as if she had just—just—"

She turned to face Jeff. "You don't think that she could have done it, do you? She probably still doesn't even know there's been a murder!"

Jeff said, "Claire, I don't suppose she told you where she was going?"

"No. Only back to Albuquerque, then away."

"Did she say anything about where she had come from? Where she'd been all these years?"

Claire shook her head. "No. She didn't want to talk to me; she wanted to get out of here. She said she'd write, but I knew she was only saying that to get away from me."

"Now, listen, girls," Lansing said. "Being the Lenna MacLane fan club is very sweet. I love you for it. But things look pretty bad for your old friend. There was that attack on Miss Briggs last evening—"

"But Lenna didn't do that!" Shirley cried. "She wasn't even here then!"

"She was in Albuquerque yesterday afternoon—she called Mr. Wilton from there. It's not impossible that she sneaked up here in the evening, tried to murder Marion Briggs then, and failed."

"And then went back to Albuquerque and waited to be picked up?" Jeff asked.

"Why not?"

"She wouldn't have phoned in that case; she wouldn't have let us know she was anywhere near."

"Maybe," Lansing said, "that would have been her alibi, that phone call. Anyway, what was she doing in Albuquerque yesterday? Why did she insist on being picked up in the middle of the night?"

Jeff shrugged. "I don't know."

"And if it wasn't she who attacked Miss Briggs yesterday, who was it?"

"I don't know that, either," Jeff said. "But Miss Briggs didn't think that the person who pushed her was trying to kill her, or even hurt her. She thought it was only that he didn't want to be seen."

Lansing shook his head hopelessly. "There's no use going on like this. We're getting nowhere. The one thing to do is find Lenna MacLane. Mrs. Benedict, what was she wearing when you saw her?"

"A light gray suit," Claire said reluctantly. "A small blue hat with a tiny veil."

"Thanks," Lansing said. "I'll get that on the wire. With any luck I'll be calling you soon to say we've got her."

I looked around the room, and on the faces of the five young women and their host I saw the horror that murder brings into a house. Just twenty-four hours ago this had been a party of gay, laughing people, excited by the prospect of reunion with an old friend. Now the murdered body of Marion

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Briggs lay in a friar's cell in the old mission, waiting for the police ambulance to free itself from local duties in Albuquerque and carry it down the mountain. Now that old friend was wanted for murder. Soon every policeman in the country would be watching for a beautiful woman in a light gray suit, a small blue hat with a tiny veil.

It still lacked a few minutes of being exactly one night and one day ago that Marion Briggs's scream had forewarned us that this reunion might not be a happy one. But even that had not quelled the gaiety of these girls; it had taken murder to do that. Now they were inert, frozen with horror and anxiety.

The evening dragged through a dinner that was scarcely touched. We stayed together in the big living room. We sat, not talking, only wondering about Lenna MacLane and how close to her the police might now be. And we listened for the ambulance that was taking so long to come, wishing that it would hurry.

It was an evening of telephone calls. Worrying families and friends of the girls, from all over the country, had wanted to know how long they would be detained. Joyce Revere, alone, must have had two dozen calls from Hollywood. Shirley's husband, and Claire's, were flying west together from New York. Betsy's husband arrived from Duluth early in the evening.

Kendall Crane was an attractive young man, dark and intense. He was nervous with concern over Betsy. He had gathered her into his arms, and it was then that she had gone completely, hysterically to pieces. He had had to carry her to the room that Bobo had arranged for them.

It wasn't much later that Bobo and all the girls, except Zita, had wandered miserably to their rooms. Zita took what little was left of a bottle of brandy and weaved her way out onto the patio. I followed her and tried to talk her into calling it a day, but she was too tight to bother listening to me.

So I rejoined Jeff at the bar, split a nightcap, then climbed the stairs to bed. It was while Jeff and I were undressing that our phone rang. Jeff picked up the receiver, and while he held it in his hand the bell rang again.

I said, "It must be the house phone."

He stepped to the small instrument on the wall beside the door. "Hello," he said.

From all the way across the room I could hear Zita Allen's voice. It was blurred with something more than alcohol; it was stricken with terror. She was shouting horribly, almost jabbering.

"Lenna's dead!" she screamed. "Lenna's murdered! I saw her—"

That was all that she had time to say. Something made her shriek in horror.

We had trouble finding her in

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that sprawling, many-roomed house. When we did get to her, she was dead. She had been strangled.

She lay grotesquely on the pantry floor, and above her the house phone's receiver dangled, still swaying, at the end of its cord.

The next morning was brilliantly lovely. The New Mexico sun was having no cloud competition at all, and it bathed the mountains as if it loved them. As far as I could see from our bedroom window there was nothing but peaceful, soothing grandeur.

Then the black ambulance crawled into my sight like a nasty black bug. I closed my eyes against it, but that did no good. Inside the car were the murdered bodies of Marion Briggs and Zita Allen. And somewhere near lay the hidden corpse of Lenna MacLane.

Now the pattern of the tragedy had emerged. There might be other answers, other solutions; we had found only one that was possible or logical. The prime victim had been Lenna MacLane. Somehow she had known, or sensed, her danger in this house and had run from it. The story she told Claire had been a lie; she was fleeing from this house in fear. She had tried to escape and hadn't made it. Somewhere the killer had caught up with her, murdered her, and hidden the body.

Marion Briggs had learned the truth, and so she had been beaten to death. And Zita, in her drunken wanderings, had come upon Lenna's body, and she had paid for that knowledge.

There was a tap-tap on our bedroom door. Jeff roused himself out of a chair and opened the door for Saul Lansing. It was a tired, bewildered policeman who walked into our room. He slumped into the chair Jeff had vacated.

Jeff said, "I see you've called your men off. They've stopped looking for Lenna MacLane's body."

"They've stopped looking for it in the house and mission."

"You shouldn't let them get discouraged," Jeff said. "That old mission has a thousand hiding places."

"The boys have been over a thousand of them," Lansing said. "It isn't there. Look, Troy. We know that Zita Allen saw the body. How much time did she have? How far could she have gone? You and your wife were the last people, except for the killer, to see Zita Allen alive."

"I'd say she had about an hour. Right, Haila?"

I nodded. "Just about an hour."

"Then," Lansing said, "Zita might have found Lenna MacLane's body any place within a mile of the house. She stumbled back here. She got as far as the kitchen phone before the murderer caught up with her."

"Zita might have known where to look for the body," Jeff said. "She might have figured out that Lenna was murdered and where her body was hidden."

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"Maybe. I hope we'll have the answer to all the questions before long." He started to rise, then decided to rest a bit more. He sighed and said, "Troy, I've just had a phone session with the lawyer in New York who handles the inheritance from the Halmont estate."

"It's a lot of money, isn't it?"

"More than a lot," Lansing said. "Halmont Senior left everything to his son. When Clyde was killed in the accident Lenna became the heir. In two years from now all that million and a half would have been hers."

"Oh," Jeff said. "One of those delayed-action wills. Wise father doesn't let errant son get his busy little hands on all the fortune at once. It's kept away from him until he's older and smarter."

"That was what old Halmont had in mind. Clyde was apparently a real wild one."

"He was that," I said. "I can remember the swath he cut through New York."

"The kid got a hundred thousand when he was twenty-one," Lansing said, "and another hundred thousand when he was twenty-five, the year he married Lenna. That was all until he was thirty-five, which would have been the year after next. His Pop figured he'd given him ten years on his own. He'd either use that money intelligently or, if he squandered it, he'd learn the value of money by not having any. As it turned out, he did squander most of it. When he was killed, Lenna got about forty thousand. And she had to wait, as he would have, for the remainder of the estate."

"And now that she's dead," Jeff said. "who gets it?"

Lansing shook his head. "Nobody would kill her for it, Troy. A dozen different charities get it."

"So," Jeff said, "there's no motive for her murder in that money."

"None that I can see."

"But can't this lawyer help in any other way?" Jeff asked. "Can't he fill in those lost years of Lenna's? Where she's been, what she's been doing?"

"No. The estate hasn't had any contact with her since she left New York; there hasn't been any reason to. Of course, when the money comes due the estate would have had to locate her. But they weren't worried about that. They figure that when someone has a million and a half dollars waiting for them, they usually turn up."

Saul Lansing got wearily to his feet. "I've a little matter to talk over with Betsy Crane," he said. "You might come along. It's not a job I like to do alone. That girl's in bad shape."

The detective had not been guilty of exaggeration; Betsy Crane was in very bad shape. All the girls had been shocked by the ghastliness of the murders. They were still too stunned to have started mourning the two girls they had known so

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well, or Marion Briggs, whose tragedy was to have accidentally been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

But Betsy Crane seemed to have been touched by something the others had been spared. The others seemed to be thinking only of the past. Betsy's eyes seemed fastened on the future, and cringing from what they saw there.

We found her in her bedroom, and I scarcely recognized her. The buoyant, youthful beauty had drained from her face, and it was gray and strained. She was sitting in her bed, hunched against the headboard, as though she were facing a firing squad. Her young husband was in a torment of worry about her. He took his eyes only briefly off Betsy to see who had walked into the room.

Saul Lansing was as gentle with her as a father with a stricken child. He said, "I'm sorry. I've got to talk to you again, Mrs. Crane."

"I understand," Betsy said tonelessly.

"Tell me—you and Mr. Crane were married secretly shortly before the show closed. Is that right?"

"Yes."

Lansing turned to Kendall Crane. "Then of course you knew Lenna MacLane," he said.

"Yes, I knew her."

"You left New York and moved to Duluth?"

"Yes."

"But both of you were still in New York when Lenna disappeared. You were still there when her huband was killed."

"Yes," Crane said.

"Did you see much of her before that, after the show closed?"

Abruptly, Betsy said, "I saw very little of her."

"I saw her exactly as often as Betsy did," Crane said.

Lansing was looking at Betsy now. "Mrs. Crane, you weren't one of Lenna's good friends?"

"We were never very close," Betsy said.

"Did you dislike her?"

"No. We were simply never very close."

The policeman sat quietly for a moment. Then from his jacket pocket he drew a yellow silk scarf. He dropped it into Betsy's lap. He said, "This is yours, Mrs. Crane. It has your monogram on it."

"Yes, it's mine," Betsy was puzzled. "How do you happen to have it?"

"You lost it," Lansing said.

"I did? I wasn't aware of it."

"Don't you know where you might have left it?"

"No, I—" Confusion crept into Betsy's voice. "I told you I didn't know."

"Could you have left it in Mr. Wilton's convertible?"

"No, I haven't been in his convertible."

"It was found there, Mrs. Crane. On the floor under the steering wheel."

Kendall Crane said angrily,

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"Stop it, Lansing! You're playing cat and mouse with Betsy! If you have anything to say—"

Lansing interrupted him, and all the gentleness was gone from his voice. "All right, Mrs. Crane. Yesterday morning the gardener noticed that one of the fenders on the convertible was dented. It hadn't been when he washed the car the afternoon before. During the night someone used that car. Your scarf was found in it, Mrs. Crane. You've had twenty-four hours to tell me that you used that car the night Lenna MacLane and Marion Briggs were murdered. I've asked you to account for your time, and you've told me that you never left your room. Now I want the truth. Where did you go in that car? What did you do?"

"I—I didn't do anything special. I only went for a drive."

"Only a drive," Lansing said. "But you didn't bother telling Wilton that you'd smashed his fender. You didn't bother telling me that you went out of the house."

"I didn't even know that I'd hurt the car!" Betsy cried. "That's why I didn't tell Bobo! And I didn't tell you—oh, I don't know why I didn't! After all that had happened it seemed so unimportant."

"After all that had happened," Lansing said, "it was very important. It still is. Where did you go, Mrs. Crane?"

"Just driving, as I told you! I couldn't sleep after I'd got to bed. I'd had too much champagne, I needed fresh air. I took the convertible. I knew that Miss Briggs would take the station wagon to get Lenna."

"Oh. So it was before Miss Briggs left for Albuquerque that you took your drive?"

"Yes. I rode down to the highway, and then I realized I shouldn't be driving. I'd had too much to drink. I must have dented the fender when I turned around. I put the car away and went back to bed. I couldn't have been gone for more than twenty minutes."

I glanced at Kendall Crane as Betsy spoke, and I saw the wonder and disbelief in his eyes. Then, instantly, he was able to conceal it. He stepped forward and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Darling," he said, "you should have told Lansing about this right away. It's all right, it doesn't matter."

"Please," Betsy said. "Please."

She turned away from him, buried her face in the pillow. Lansing stood looking down at her, and from his eyes I knew that young Mrs. Kendall Crane was in trouble. "Try to get some rest," he said shortly. He motioned to Jeff and me, and we followed him out of the room.

At the door I looked back. Betsy's face was still buried out of sight. Her husband rose from the bed and was walking away from it when Jeff pulled the door shut.

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Once out in the corridor Lansing left us abruptly. From the head of the stairs we watched him cross the circular hallway and disappear through the arch into the mission. His voice drifted to us from the patio as he called to one of his men.

We found Bobo and his guests in the living room. The quartet was seated in a tight little group around the coffee table beside the pool. Bobo had neglected, understandably, his morning ritual of raising the glassed wall and its blind to let in the sun and permit the breeze to riffle the indoor half of the pool.

The room was in a twilight, and it took a moment to see its disorder. There were overflowing ashtrays, dirty coffee cups and glasses. There was a half bottle of dead champagne on the bar. Marion Briggs was gone now; Bobo's house had lost its keeper.

The telephone's bell interrupted Bobo's dismal greeting to us. It was for Shirley and Claire; their husbands were collaborating on a call from Chicago. I gathered that their flight had been grounded by bad weather which looked temporary enough to make it inadvisable to come the rest of the way by train. You could tell, by listening to the two women on the phone, the wide difference in their marriages.

It wasn't hard to picture Shirley's comfortable and serene home in Westchester. You could imagine her husband and his two sons, who were already grown boys when she had married Malcolm Wharton, as just the family Shirley needed to make her happy.

Claire's marriage to Nicky Benedict was exactly the opposite. I didn't need to imagine what it was like; I knew from the New York columnists. Nicky was still the good-time boy he had been when he and Lenna's husband were pals. When he had time to work he was an unsuccessful artist. He and Claire lived their hectic, flamboyant, stormy romance in public, in night clubs, theaters, bars.

When they tiffed, you read about it in your morning paper. When they reconciled, you read about it in the evening. But somehow the marriage had lasted, and I thought, as I listened to Claire say goodbye to Nicky, that I knew why. She was madly, deeply in love with her Nicky-boy.

It was Joyce Revere who was the romantic unfortunate of the *Watch Out!* girls. She had tried marriage twice, been divorced twice. Her first husband had been a film star, her second a tennis star. It seemed that Joyce might better stop making her marriages in heaven. At the moment she was matrimonially at liberty and from the rueful expression on her face as she listened to her friends take comfort from their husbands, she wasn't enjoying her liberty.

Claire and Shirley came back to the low-slung divan and sat on either side of Joyce. Bobo, sitting

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cross-legged on the floor, looked up at them and shook his head disconsolately.

"I've always wanted to meet your husband, Shirley," he said, "and I so want to see Nicky again. Well, now I will. Because some maniac has murdered Lenna and Zita and poor Marion Briggs."

It hadn't seemed to occur to Bobo that the maniac might be one of the three young ladies who faced him across his coffee table, or the pitifully nerve-wracked girl in the room upstairs.

He sighed and said, "Yes, I'll see your husbands, and then I'll never see any of you again."

Joyce leaned toward him. "Darling, this will all be over soon. And next year we'll be back—the four of us will come back."

"You will?" Bobo asked wistfully.

"Of course," Claire said.

"Well," Bobo said, "it won't be to this house you'll come. I'll sell it or —or burn it." His voice rose. "I'll build a new beautiful place—" He stopped. "No," he said, "it can never be as it was again. Why has this happened? I remember the eight of you girls, so young and lovely, such wonderful futures ahead of you. Then first it was Lenna's tragedy, with Clyde's death. Then Dixie in the plane crash. Now this. Lenna and Zita, both of them at once."

Jeff said, "Bobo, when was the last time you were all together? Do you remember?"

"I wish I couldn't remember," Bobo said quietly. "It was at my picnic at Sneeden's Landing. I remember how it started out, so fine, so gay. Everyone loved my picture-contest idea; they all thought it was such fun. It was a wonderful party, and then it was a horrible one. Clyde disappearing and all of us hunting for him, getting more worried by the minute. And then finding him there at the foot of the cliff, that horrible cliff."

"Don't, Bobo, dear," Joyce said.

"Well, that was the last time we were all together. I only saw poor Dixie once or twice after that. And Janice sailed for South Africa with her new husband the next week, and of course I never saw her again. I half expected that—South Africa is so far away. But I did expect to see Lenna again, and I never did. My parties, because of my stupid parties—"

"Now, Bobo," Joyce said.

"It was because of one of my parties that Clyde died and Lenna's life was ruined. It was my doing. And Lenna was so happy, so much in love."

"Bobo, stop it!" Shirley said. "Stop talking that way. It isn't true. Lenna wasn't in love with Clyde."

There was a moment of absolute silence. Shirley's four friends stared at her with shocked incredulity.

It was Claire who spoke first. "Shirley, do you know what you're saying?"

"It's the truth," Shirley said.

Jeff moved closer to the big divan.

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"Shirley," he said, "nobody else seems to know this, or even to have suspected it. How can you know that Lenna wasn't in love with Clyde Halmont?"

"He told me. Yes," she added defiantly, "he did. I knew Clyde before any of the others did. I was the one who introduced him to the gang. He never had any romantic notions about me; we were friends. And just a few months after he'd married Lenna he came to me in one of his more sober moments. He was a very unhappy boy. He said that Lenna was putting on a sensational act of being the loving, devoted wife. But that's all it was—an act, a lie. She had no feeling for him at all, only for his money. He was bitter and wanted a divorce."

"But after his death," Claire said, "she went all to pieces. You know that, Shirley. She was heartbroken."

"I've never believed that," Shirley said. "I think that was an act, too."

"But to go to such lengths!" Bobo said. "To go into complete retirement as Lenna did! She gave up her friends, the life she loved, everything! Why, Shirley?"

"I don't know," Shirley said. "I've always wondered."

Joyce said slowly, "I saw Lenna just once after the accident. I've wondered about her, too. I thought that I could see more than grief in Lenna's behavior. I thought that she was—well, maybe frightened. She needed money, too, and I lent her some—several hundred dollars."

It was Bobo who voiced the surprise that this second bombshell concerning the life and love of Lenna MacLane created. He said, "Now, this is too much! I knew that Clyde was racing through his money, but there was something left. There must have been!"

"About forty thousand dollars," Jeff said.

"At least," Bobo said. "And you know how Lenna was living. She didn't go out, she didn't entertain, she lived so simply. Joyce, she couldn't have needed money!"

"She borrowed some from me," Joyce said doggedly, "and she didn't tell me why she needed it. She said something about a check being late. I knew that wasn't true, but I didn't press her. I felt that she was in some kind of trouble, and then, when she disappeared from New York so strangely, that proved me right."

"Yes," Bobo said slowly, "there was that. Lenna's leaving New York. That always puzzled me. She loved New York, it was her town. I know how she struggled to get out of that dismal Pennsylvania place she grew up in. I thought she'd never want to leave New York."

"Maybe," Jeff said, "she didn't want to leave it. Maybe someone, or something, forced her into going."

"It could have been," Shirley said. "I only know it wasn't because of Clyde that she left. It wasn't because of him that New York became unbearable for her."

"So it was something else that

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drove her away," Jeff said. "Something that sent her into hiding all these years."

He walked slowly away from the group, skirted the edge of the pool, stopped, and stared down into the water. Bobo and the girls watched him tensely. When Saul Lansing asked his question from the doorway, I didn't know if anyone else could have answered it, but I thought I could.

"Troy," he said, "there's something on your mind. What is it?"

Jeff turned to the policeman. He said, "Lansing, a girl spends nearly forty thousand dollars in practically no time and no one can see what she's spent it on. A girl loves New York, it's the only place in the world for her. Yet she runs away from it, goes into hiding. What does all that add up to?"

"The girl's Lenna MacLane?"

"Yes."

"I'd say that very possibly Lenna MacLane was being blackmailed."

"So would I," Jeff said. "The blackmailer took her for everything she had, but still hounded her. She borrowed money, tried to stay in New York, but at last she had to give up. She ran away from her blackmailer, hid from him."

"Yes," Lansing said. "It makes sense."

"And maybe," Jeff went on, "it answers another question. Why did Lenna decide to come to this party? And why did she do it in such a strange way, arriving in the middle of the night? Maybe she decided to come and get rid of her blackmailer —murder her. But instead—"

"Instead," Lansing said, "the blackmailer beat her to it? You might still be making sense, Troy."

"No!" Bobo exploded, and Lenna's three old friends echoed him.

"It's ridiculous!" Joyce said. "You have to have done something wrong to get yourself blackmailed! And Lenna, what could she ever have done?"

"Nothing!" Claire said.

"Of course, nothing!" Shirley said. "You're wrong, I know you are. What could she have done that gave someone the power to control her life?"

"Only she and that someone know," Lansing said. "But her life was being controlled. I agree with Troy." He was looking at Bobo now, frowning, thoughtful. "Mr. Wilton, was it you who told me about Lenna and Kendall Crane?"

"I think I may have mentioned it." Bobo was puzzled. "Why do you ask?"

"Bobo," Claire said, "what did you tell him about Lenna and Ken?"

"Why, only that when Lenna got her job in *Watch Out!* Ken was her beau. That was how we all met him."

"Were they engaged?" Lansing asked.

"No," Bobo said, "it never got that far."

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"But they were in love with each other."

"I guess so," Bobo said.

Lansing turned to the girls. "What do you say about it?" he asked. "Were they in love with each other?"

Claire spoke up. "Yes, I guess they were. It was hard to tell about Lenna. She was never one to discuss her feelings. But we all expected that she and Ken—well, that it would last. But it didn't. Suddenly it was over. Lenna ended it quick—bing! —like that."

"Didn't you ever wonder why?" Lansing asked.

"Yes, of course we wondered." Claire smiled grimly. "I can see you've never been in a show-girl dressing room. We used to discuss it all the time behind her back, but we didn't find an answer. Until she married Clyde."

"And then you thought she had given up Crane for Clyde Halmont. But maybe," Lansing said, "you were wrong. Maybe that was just another place where Lenna's life was being controlled. Maybe she was forced to give him up."

"But why?" Shirley asked. "Why would anyone do that to her?"

"Well," Lansing said, "right after Lenna dropped him, Kendall Crane got married. That seems a little strange, doesn't it? It happened pretty suddenly, didn't it?"

It was Joyce Revere who was the first to grasp the policeman's insinuation. "Are you saying," she asked incredulously, "that it was Betsy who forced Lenna to give up Kendall Crane?"

"It was Betsy who got him," Lansing said flatly. "She married him."

"But she'd always been crazy about him," Joyce said. "Even when he was in love with Lenna. We all knew that, we all teased her."

"But," Lansing said, "she never stood a chance with him while Lenna was in the way. But with Lenna out of the way—"

"You can't be serious!" Joyce cried. "You can't be accusing Betsy of blackmail!"

He didn't bother to answer her. He turned abruptly to Jeff. "I want to talk to you, Troy." Together they left the room.

A few minutes later Jeff came back to tell me that he and Lansing were driving into Albuquerque. He had no time to explain. He hurried away and I went upstairs to my bedroom.

As the afternoon dragged on, my wondering about Betsy Crane became a desire to do something for her. Lansing, I knew, had the beginnings of a case against her. It was incredible that Betsy could be a cold, ruthless blackmailer, a brutal killer, but I knew of no way to prove to Lansing that she wasn't. When, from my bedroom window, I saw Kendall Crane striding miserably back and forth in the garden below me, I took for granted that Betsy was alone.

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The sun was down; darkness had begun to settle in the center of the house. I groped my way down the corridor to Betsy's room. I tapped twice on the door. There was no answer. I knocked again before I tried the door and found it open. Betsy was lying on her bed, her back to me.

I tiptoed to the foot of the bed. Her eyes were closed but I could see the lashes flutter.

The footsteps in the hall warned me, but I was still startled by the sharpness of Lansing's voice. Betsy was more startled than I. She sat straight up, her eyes wide and frightened as she looked at the policeman. He motioned Jeff into the room, closed the door. He switched on a light and came to Betsy's bed.

"Mrs. Crane," he said.

"Yes?"

"Before your husband married you," he said with cold bluntness, "he was in love with Lenna MacLane."

Betsy's lips trembled; she didn't speak.

"You were able to break up that romance."

"No, oh, no! Lenna herself—"

"You had some information about Lenna MacLane that made her do whatever you wanted. You took Kendall Crane away from her. Later you took her money from her, drove her from New York, forced her into hiding."

"No!" Betsy cried. "Oh, why would I do that?"

"Because you knew," Lansing said, "that your husband still loved her."

Betsy put her face in her hands; she turned away from Lansing. His voice rose as he pounded at her. "Two days ago, in the afternoon, Lenna MacLane arrived in Albuquerque. Your husband learned about it and flew here at once to meet her."

"No!" Betsy said. "Ken didn't get here until yesterday, long after Lenna had been killed!"

"You know that isn't true, Mrs. Crane. Your husband arrived in Albuquerque the evening before the murder. He registered at the Hotel Scott, asked for Lenna MacLane. Somehow you found out about it—"

"No," Betsy sobbed.

The policeman shook his head. "You knew, Mrs. Crane. And Lenna MacLane realized when she got here that she was in danger; she tried to run away. Someone followed her, probably in a car, and killed her."

He waited until Betsy's sobs had quieted. He spoke softly, but with no gentleness. "All right, Mrs. Crane. You used the convertible. What time did you use it? And why?"

"I told you. I only went for a ride! And it was just after one o'clock, long before Lenna got here."

"Betsy," Jeff said, "did you know that Ken was in Albuquerque?"

She looked at him for a moment, then she spoke directly to him, "Yes,

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I knew. Ken telephoned me from home, just to say hello, to see if I was having fun. It was right after Bobo had told us that Lenna was coming. Zita answered the phone. She told Ken that Lenna was in Albuquerque, that she was coming here."

Lansing said, "You wouldn't have told him that, would you, Mrs. Crane?"

Betsy said dully, "No, I wouldn't have told him."

"But he knew," Lansing went on. "And then?"

"I phoned Ken later to say good night. He wasn't home. Our housekeeper said that he had left suddenly on a business trip. She didn't know where."

"You didn't believe that," Lansing said.

She was still talking to Jeff, not looking at the policeman. "I was afraid I knew where Ken had gone. I called the Hotel Scott. He was registered there. I didn't talk to him. I—I just hung up."

"You thought he was with Lenna MacLane."

"Yes, I thought he was with her. I must have gone out of my mind then. I got into the convertible; I started for Albuquerque. And then, when I got as far as the highway, I came to my senses. I couldn't have stood seeing them together, even if I'd been able to find them. I turned around and came back to the house. I never saw Lenna."

"Why did you lie, then, about using the car?"

She turned to him at last. "Oh, don't you see? Can't you understand? I couldn't let Ken know that I was still jealous, that I still didn't trust him! If he loved me at all, he would stop if he knew how horribly I'd acted!"

"All right," Lansing said. "I've heard your story, Mrs. Crane. Now I'd like some more important people than me to hear it. I want you to come to the barracks with me."

"You're arresting me," Betsy said numbly. "You think that I killed Lenna. You think I killed Zita and —and Marion Briggs. No—oh, no!"

"I want you to come with me," Lansing repeated. "I'll give you ten minutes to dress."

Jeff and I followed the policeman out into the hall and down the steps. There was only one person in the big living room. Ken Crane stood at the bar, pouring himself a brandy.

Lansing flicked a look at Jeff that meant he would handle this alone. He sat down at the bar beside Ken. When Ken pushed the bottle toward him, Lansing stopped it halfway. He said, "Did you see Lenna MacLane in Albuquerque the other night?"

Ken's eyes lowered to the glass before him. He picked it up and drained it. He said, "So you know about that."

"Did you see her?" Lansing said again.

"No, I didn't find her. She wasn't registered at the hotel." He looked

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up at Lansing, his face grim. "Does Betsy know about this?"

"She's known about it since the beginning. She suspected it and phoned the Hotel Scott. She found out you were there."

Kendall Crane groaned softly. "So that was it. That's what's been the matter with Betsy."

"Couldn't you have figured it out?"

Ken rubbed his fingertips across his forehead. "I was afraid that was it. But Lenna is somebody Betsy and I never discuss. It's always been like that."

"I can believe that," Lansing said. "You've always been in love with her."

"No," Crane said. "I got over Lenna before I married Betsy. Completely over her."

"But you've kept on seeing her."

"In the last nine years, since she left New York, I've seen her only once."

"When?"

"About three years ago. I met her accidentally in a hotel bar in Chicago. I don't believe I'd have known her if I hadn't heard her speak to the waiter. There was hardly a trace of the old Lenna—her beauty was almost entirely gone. She was unkempt and—and shabby. I tried to help her, to give her money. She refused it. She turned and walked away from me. I knew that she hated having us meet, and it broke my heart, seeing her like that. Lenna, of all people."

Lansing said, "Marion Briggs saw her the night before she was murdered. Claire Benedict saw her, too, for just a moment. They said she was beautiful, as beautiful as ever."

Kendall Crane shook his head. "She was pitiful when I saw her last."

Lansing said, "All right. She'd lost her looks and you no longer loved her. But you wanted to see her again."

"I was worried about her."

"The way you'd worry about any old friend?"

"Any old friend like Lenna." He looked sharply at Lansing. "You don't believe me? You think there was still something between Lenna and me?"

Lansing didn't answer his question. Instead he said, "Did you tell your wife that you'd seen her in Chicago?"

"I hadn't meant to tell her. But inadvertently I said something. She knew."

"And it upset her."

Crane nodded.

"And, of course, that's why you tried to see Lenna this time without your wife knowing. You were afraid this would make her unhappy."

"Yes. I didn't want to hurt Betsy; I'd do anything rather than that. I happen to love her very much. I was only a kid when I met Lenna and she took me by storm. But Betsy, she's never really understood that."

"All right," Lansing said. "Lenna

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MacLane meant nothing to you. But you did fly down to Albuquerque to try and find her."

"She still meant enough to me to want to help her if I could. I never forgot how she looked when I last saw her. You don't want anyone you were ever fond of to be as miserable as that."

Lansing said slowly, "You know, Crane, I believe you. But your wife—she believes you were still in love with Lenna."

"She's afraid that I was."

"And she's a very jealous young lady," Lansing said. "Violently jealous, I'd say."

Kendall Crane looked at him with incredulous horror. "You think—you think she murdered Lenna because of me!"

"I'm taking her down to the barracks."

Crane was on his feet, shouting at the policeman. "You—you're insane! Where is Betsy now?"

"Upstairs. In her room."

"I'm going to see her!"

"Sure; go ahead, kid. Take five minutes. Then bring her downstairs with you."

Ken ran the length of the living room, leaped across the corner of the pool. I heard him pound through the hall and up the stairs.

Lansing shook his head. He poured some brandy into a glass and drank it down. He looked at his watch. He was still looking at it when we heard Ken shouting upstairs.

In a second we were out in the hall. Ken was racing down the stairs toward us. His voice was wild. "She's gone—Betsy's gone!"

He rushed on past us, through the arch, toward the patio of the mission. The others in the house were pouring into the hallway. Joyce and Shirley came down the stairs, Bobo Wilton behind them. We heard a car's engine roar into gear as Kendall Crane took off after his wife. Lansing shook his head at the sound.

"She couldn't have gone outside," he said, "without one of my men seeing her."

"She didn't go outside," a voice said.

We all turned. Across the circle of the hall Claire Benedict stood in the library doorway.

Lansing moved quickly toward her. "Did you see Mrs. Crane?" he snapped.

"Yes. She was here in the library when I came in about five minutes ago."

"Where did she go?"

Claire's face was suddenly frightened. "Why?" she asked. "What's happened to Betsy?"

"Until now I wasn't sure," Lansing said. "But this running away proves it. She's wanted for murder. What was she doing in the library?"

Behind me I heard the short gasp of fright. Then Bobo Wilton was brushing by me, running across the library to the big desk that stood beside the window. One of its drawers

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was standing partly open, and Bobo's hands were shaking as he wrenched it all the way out. He groped for a moment inside it. Then he wheeled around to face us.

"My gun," he said. "There was a gun in that drawer."

Lansing's voice slashed across Bobo's like a razor. "Did you see Betsy Crane at that desk, Mrs. Benedict?"

"She was just leaving the room when I came in. I didn't know what she'd been doing."

"You didn't see her with a gun?"

"No. She had nothing in her hands. I—" Claire's words stopped suddenly. "I—I'm wrong. She had a jacket thrown over one arm. There could have been a gun—"

"Where did she go, Mrs. Benedict?"

"Through that archway into the mission," Claire said. Her voice was numb, toneless. "She turned left. She didn't go through to the patio. She was heading for the wing with all the monk's cells."

With sleight-of-hand rapidity the policeman was holding a gun. He whirled toward the door, but Claire Benedict caught at his arm and held it.

"You're not going after her, are you?" she whispered. "You know why she's taken that gun. You've frightened her, terrified her. She means to kill herself. And if you go in there—with that gun—"

"What do you want me to do, Mrs. Benedict?"

"Let one of us go to her! She's not afraid of us. We could talk to her; we could reason with her."

"She's got a gun," Lansing said. "You think she means to use it on herself. But if she changes her mind —"

"No!" Shirley's voice trembled as she stepped up beside Claire, but her eyes were flashing. "I'm not afraid —none of us is afraid. Any one of us will go and talk to Betsy. You may be wrong about her still; she may be innocent. You've got to let one of us go to her."

The policeman hesitated, his face wracked with indecision as he glanced at the circle of people surrounding him. The eyes of the girls and Bobo Wilton were fixed on him in wordless pleading.

Claire stepped closer to him. "Let me go," she said. "Give Betsy this chance. If you go and she—she hurts herself—"

"All right," Lansing said. "All right, Mrs. Benedict. I'll give you ten minutes."

The smile Claire managed was pitifully feeble, but she smiled. We watched her as she crossed the wide circle of hall and passed through the arch, then turned left into the wing of the old mission that held the honeycomb of friars' cells.

Lansing looked at his watch and all of us turned, as if controlled by some unseen machine, to face the big clock on the fireplace mantel. Suddenly its ticking was audible, loud and slow and ominous.

We waited, hardly breathing. The

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echo of Claire's footsteps on the stone floor had died away and there was no sound now but the ticking of the clock. An eternity passed, and yet, by the hands of the clock, not even a minute had gone by.

It was Joyce who broke the deathly hush. "She may not find her," she said. "Maybe Betsy isn't in there now. Maybe she only went through that wing and out of it."

"No," Bobo said quietly. "Not out of that part of the mission. There is no way out."

Jeff said, "There must be some way."

"No," Bobo said again.

"Whoever it was that attacked Marion Briggs," Jeff said, "went into that part of the mission. And there was no one there when I looked. Somehow he got out."

"Betsy Crane won't get out of there," Lansing said. "Wilton is right, Troy. My men have been over that building. There's only one way out of that wing—this way."

"But the person who frightened Marion Briggs," Jeff said, "went into that wing. She said he had. Yet there was no one there." He stopped. "But Marion Briggs was frightened. That scream was real, she was terrified. But what was it, what frightened her?"

They weren't listening. All of them had turned back to the doorway again, their eyes piercing the mission arch, their ears filled with the sound of a ticking clock.

"It was during the storm that she screamed," Jeff said, and there was a look in his eyes that startled me. "The storm—"

I remembered the storm, the sudden blackness of it, the slashing rain, the girls laughing in the brightness of the big room. They'd all been talking about it—about Lenna MacLane's horror of thunder and lightning. Maybe that was all that had frightened Marion Briggs; maybe she, like Lenna, had had a fear of storms. But she wouldn't have lied about it. She wouldn't have invented a person who attacked her unless—

I looked at Jeff again, and I knew what he was thinking.

"Jeff," I said, "Lenna was afraid —"

"Yes," he said. "She would have been able to change her voice, her face, everything. Everything but her phobia, her fear of a storm. She couldn't have changed that. She couldn't have kept herself from screaming when that terrific flash of lightning hit near her. So she would have lied about it. She could have said someone attacked her."

The insistence of Jeff's voice demanded their attention. One by one the people in the room turned to him.

"And Zita could have found out," he said. "Somehow, she could have realized the truth. She would know that the body lying in the mission, waiting for the ambulance, was Lenna's body. And somehow, even with the face all battered in, she

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could have known that Marion Briggs was Lenna MacLane."

They were all looking at Jeff now, looking at him as though they had heard the words of a madman chattering nonsense.

Bobo Wilton was the first to speak. "No!" he cried. "I would have known Lenna! All the months that Marion Briggs was here I would have known."

"You hadn't seen Lenna for ten years. You remembered her as a gorgeous, glamorous youngster, not a dowdy, fat woman in her thirties. She tried out her disguise on you, and you didn't know her. And the rest of you—none of you ever looked at Marion Briggs. She was Bobo's housekeeper, a piece of furniture. That was the way she made it."

"But it was Lenna who phoned me!" Bobo said. "I knew her voice at once! She didn't even have to tell me who it was!"

"She dropped her Marion Briggs role for that call. She was an actress, remember. For that call she became Lenna again, using Lenna's voice. She did it once more, late in the night, when Joyce heard Lenna's laugh."

He turned to me. "It was you, Haila, that Marion Briggs awakened in the night. She told you about bringing Lenna back. You didn't know Lenna. There was no danger of your rushing in to see her and discovering that there was no one there."

"But she was here!" Bobo cried. "Claire saw her that morning, leaving the house! Claire told us how beautiful she still was; she told us what she was wearing."

I saw the look that shot between Lansing and Jeff, the flash of stunned realization, before both of them were racing through the arch into the mission.

Shirley said, "What is it? Why are they—?"

"It's Claire," I said. "Claire murdered Lenna and Zita."

"Claire!"

"Yes. And she tricked us into letting her go to Betsy. *She* has the gun, not Betsy." I kept my voice low; I was listening for a shot, a shot that would mean Lansing and Jeff had been too late. "She's going to kill Betsy now. We're supposed to think that it was suicide, that Betsy killed herself because she was guilty."

"Claire killed Lenna and Zita," Bobo whispered, "and now—"

It was quiet again; we were waiting. In a crumbling, dusty cell in the mission was a girl who had, somehow, been tricked into going there by a murderess. She was waiting for the murderess, probably waiting for her to keep her promise to help her.

But the murderess had a gun. This instant she might be lifting that gun to Betsy's head. Claire would only have to wipe her prints from the gun and thrust it into Betsy's still hand.

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If the two men weren't in time, Betsy would be dead. And somewhere, out on the highway, Kendall Crane was frantically searching for the wife he loved.

The quiet was broken by the distant shuffle of footsteps on stone. Slowly they came toward us. Then Jeff moved into the arch. In his arms lay Betsy.

"She's all right," he said. "She isn't hurt."

As he carried her up the stairs I caught a glimpse of moving figures through the archway. I turned quickly, and followed Jeff up the steps. I didn't want to see Claire Benedict as Lansing dragged her from the house to book her for the murder of her two old friends.

I watched Jeff shake hands with Saul Lansing in the doorway of the police barracks. He climbed into the back seat of the car beside me. Our driver, one of Lansing's men, started the car toward Albuquerque. Our week-end at Bobo Wilton's was over.

At this moment Bobo was closing up his house; he was moving to Santa Fe. This morning, early, Betsy and Ken Crane had left for home and a life that these three ghastly days had shattered, then ironically mended and made more secure for the two of them.

Joyce Revere was already back in Hollywood. At the Albuquerque airport Shirley was waiting for her husband. And a policeman was waiting for that plane, to tell Nicky Benedict that his wife was a blackmailer who had killed her victim, then killed Zita Allen in an attempt to conceal her crime.

"Jeff," I said, "I hope you didn't have to see Claire Benedict."

"No," Jeff said. "She confessed. Lansing let me read her statement."

"Why was she blackmailing Lenna? Was it something about the accident that killed Lenna's husband?"

"So you've guessed that, too. Yes, rather than let Clyde Halmont divorce her, Lenna murdered him. And Claire saw her do it. She'd wandered away from the picnic that day and she saw Lenna and Clyde at the top of the cliff. She'd thought it would make a pretty picture, the two of them silhouetted there.

"But when she raised her camera to take the shot, it wasn't a pretty picture. They were struggling. It wasn't much of a struggle, Clyde was very drunk, but that's the picture Claire got—just a moment before Lenna managed to push him off the cliff. And it was with that picture she was able to blackmail her old friend."

"A lovely duo, Lenna and Claire."

"Well, at least Claire was capable of loving somebody. She loved her Nicky. Unfortunately he's a gigolo-type kiddo. He wanted a wife who would make life easy for him, and very gay. That takes money. And Claire loved him so much she'd do anything to get him that money, even to running such a dangerous

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risk as to blackmail Lenna MacLane."

"She did know how dangerous it was, didn't she?"

"Sure. Lenna had killed to get the Halmont money, so she'd kill again to keep it. But Claire worked out an elaborate, foolproof way to collect anonymously. She rented a locker at Grand Central, had a duplicate key made, sent it to Lenna with instructions. Lenna was to leave forty thousand dollars in that locker at a certain time, then take a train to Stamford, register at a certain hotel there. Then Claire checked with a phone call, making sure that Lenna was there. Now she knew it was safe for her to collect the money. Lenna couldn't possibly be watching her or the locker; Lenna was miles away. It worked fine."

"And so she tried it again?"

"Right. Only, the next time Lenna apparently couldn't raise the dough. So she ran away, still not knowing who her enemy was, only that it was one of the *Watch Out!* girls."

"Jeff, think of the torture she must have suffered all these years! Roaming the country, hiding, trying to figure out who her blackmailer was."

"And getting more desperate as time went on," Jeff said. "The Halmont money, the million and a half, would be due soon. She knew that the moment she collected it, her blackmailer would start after her again. So before that she had to murder her blackmailer—if she could find out who it was. As Lenna MacLane she had failed to do that; but maybe as a stranger—"

"And so she became Marion Briggs."

Jeff nodded. "I think the idea must have come to her when she saw Ken Crane in Chicago, and he hardly recognized her. She must have realized how much she'd changed unintentionally. So if she put her mind to it— Well, she did just that. She became Marion Briggs and no one—not Bobo nor any of the girls—saw through her disguise."

"And then she set her trap to catch her blackmailer," I said.

"Right, Haila, and she did it cleverly. She fixed it so Lenna was supposed to arrive in the middle of the night, leave the next morning. That gave the blackmailer only a few hours to do her work. And, as Marion Briggs, she would be watching the room Lenna was supposedly in every minute of those hours.

"From there on, we know exactly what happened; it's in Claire's statement. Claire heard Lenna's laugh, just as Joyce had. She knew that she had arrived. After the house was quiet she went to Lenna's room. She was as cautious as ever; she made sure this was no trap. She made sure that Lenna wasn't watching her from a closet or through a keyhole. And when she knew she was safe, she slipped a note under Lenna's door."

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"But then," I said, "she discovered that Marion Briggs had seen her."

"She met Marion in the hall. Marion pretended that she was just checking up on the house, doing her duty as housekeeper; but there was something about her, a look of triumph in her eyes, that made Claire realize the whole truth. She knew that Marion Briggs was Lenna and that the whole thing *had* been a trap."

"And then? Did Lenna try to kill her?" I asked.

"No, that apparently wasn't her plan. I figure that she meant to kill her later, probably follow her back to New York to murder her there. Then she would have vanished and Marion Briggs would be no more. And in two years Lenna would appear to claim her inheritance."

"Jeff, if Lenna's plan had succeeded, how would she, as Marion Briggs, have explained that Lenna was missing the next morning?"

"Probably the same way that Claire did. She could say that Lenna had told her she couldn't bear seeing her old friends and had slipped away. No crime would have been committed, so nobody would have questioned that."

"But her plan didn't succeed because Claire recognized her."

"And Claire knew that she meant to kill her sometime," Jeff added. "So Claire had to kill or be killed."

"Then Claire did some fast thinking," I said. "Bright girl, Claire."

"Very bright. She killed Lenna, dragged her into the room where Lenna was supposed to have been, and bashed in her face so she wouldn't be identified as anyone but poor Marion Briggs. Then she told us her story about seeing Lenna sneak away. She was clever about that, too.

"She seemed to be protecting her old friend, but she made her point. The police began looking for Lenna MacLane, a murderess."

"And this murderess the police were looking for," I said, "was actually the victim."

"And Claire was safe," Jeff said, "until Zita got wise. She must have got the idea that Marion Briggs was Lenna the same way we did—the storm phobia. She went to the mission and looked at Marion's body. Do you remember the girls talking about an accident Lenna once had backstage?"

"Yes, I remember. She cut her leg and she'd been so brave about the stitches."

"That's it. On Marion Briggs's knee there was a scar, and Zita recognized that scar. It was proof that the body was Lenna MacLane. Zita tried to tell us that over the phone, but Claire stopped her. Claire was getting pretty good at that sort of thing."

"And then Betsy. She was going to kill Betsy," I said.

"And that, she hoped, would close the case forever. She found Betsy in such a hysterical state because Lansing suspected her that

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she'd listen to anyone, do anything. It wasn't hard for Claire to convince her that she had to run away. She got her to hide in the mission, promising that she'd come to her, help her get away.

"Then she went to get Bobo's gun. She meant to meet Betsy, all right—and murder her. And it would have closed the case. She would have made Betsy's death seem a suicide, an admission of guilt. But we spoiled that plan by meeting Claire in the library before she had a chance to get to Betsy."

"But even then she didn't give up. Getting all of us to wait there while she went into the mission after Betsy—to murder her. She certainly kept her wits about her."

"But in the end she outwitted herself. As soon as we knew that Marion Briggs was Lenna, we knew Claire was guilty. She said she had seen Lenna, as beautiful as ever. That was the lie that trapped her."

"It goes to show," I said, "you shouldn't flatter people."

"Right, Haila. Never flatter anyone."

"Except your wife. Flatter me, Jeff; I could use a little. After all this I feel old and gray."

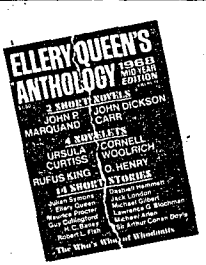
"Okay," Jeff said, "I'll flatter you." He waved his hand at the window. "See all that scenery? The majestic, multicolored mountains reaching up through the blue air toward the golden sun?"

"Yes, Jeff."

"Well, you're much nicer-looking."

"Thank you, Jeff."

"You're welcome, Haila."



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a *NEW* story by *ROBERT BLOCH*

BE SURE TO READ THIS FIRST

Is there ever a justification for publishing a story in bad taste? The rule is—no, there isn't. But you know the vulnerability of any rule: the exception proves its validity, proves its very existence. And the exception in this instance is that you can publish a story in bad taste —if the story exposes *bad taste . . .*

THE GODS ARE NOT MOCKED

by ROBERT BLOCH

HARRY HINCH WAS A FUNNY MAN and he sold funny things. He had a groovy little hole-in-the-wall shop near the Strip with a big burlap sack hanging in the window and a sign reading *What's Your Bag?* and inside he stocked goodies for everyone.

There were lurid paperbacks and off-brand LPs, of course, and Campy photographic blowups of Theda Bara, but Harry's store wasn't just one of those places catering to UCLA drop-outs. Naturally he sold psychedelic prints and Nazi helmets and Iron Crosses and Mellow Yellow and sunflower seeds, but he had some swinging specialties, too. Like dirty Mother's Day cards, for instance. And leather goods—a whole counter of gloves, high-heeled boots, riding crops, and dog whips. For the birds he stocked kinky lingerie; bras in the shape of two clutching, hairy hands; and a G-string designed to look like an open mouth with two rows of sharp-pointed teeth.

But Harry was proudest of the items he dreamed up on his own. Along with the usual bumper stickers and buttons—*Virginity Causes Cancer, Dracula Sucks,* and *Mary Poppins Is A Junky*—he pushed a line of originals like *It Takes Two To Make A Love-In, Flower-Children Are Pansies,* and *Keep Incest In The Family.*

To look at him, sitting up front behind the cash register, you'd never think he was a mover and shaker. There are a dozen duplicates of Harry in the sidewalk scofferies on the Strip—they're all a little on the short side, dress very tight and Mod, and when their hairlines start to re-

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cede they sprout the usual compensation on their chins. They plant grass, they sell tickets for trips you can't book with a travel agency, they'll match you with an ideal partner without using a computer. But most of them aren't really *creative,* like Harry was.

He was the one who did the *I'm A Flaming Heterosexual* button and the bumper sticker that says, *Caution—This Car Is Driven By Helen Keller.* Bumper stickers were a "thing" with old Harry. Every night he sat up turning out jollies like *Be Charitable—Contribute To The Delinquency Of Minors,* and *Dr. Fu Manchu Is Alive And Performing Abortions In Pasadena.*

Of course not everybody dug Harry. Some cubes said he was hung-up on put-downs. But you've got to expect such flap from the senior citizens; their idea of black comedy ended with Amos 'n Andy. The fuzz did everything they could to nail him for running an illegal letter drop, pushing pot, and a few other sideline scuffles, but Harry just kept on laughing and scratching.

It was always a freak-out scene at Harry's shop, with the hogs and choppers parked outside and the hippies and the teeny-boppers balling it up inside. He kept it cool and quiet, and the only noise was the ringing of the cash register.

When the crunch came, Harry was clean. It wasn't his problem when a juvie named Kim Carmichael wiggled her miniskirt at old Grabber. Sure, they met at his shop, but Harry didn't set up the action. Harry didn't claim he was a chemistry major, and if he sold Grabber a few sugar cubes that didn't prove he knew they were loaded.

Old Grabber had come on strong for Kim Carmichael, but Harry never told him to cut out with her riding tail-gunner on his chopper; Harry never told him to suck the cubes he bought, and Harry definitely didn't tell him to sail off that sharp curve on top of Mulholland and total the chopper, himself, and Kim Carmichael.

When Harry got the word he knew it was either split out or cop out and he wasn't about to take any chances of getting busted. So he hung his *God Is Dead And I'm Going To The Funeral* sign on the front door and faded fast.

'Way past Baldy, up in the National Forest, Harry had a little pad —just a shack, a real nothing scene, but a place where he could get away from the heat.

That's where Harry headed for, right into the old boondocks, 'way out in the toolies with big trees and the mountains and the high lonesomes all around. He holed up in his cabin and waited; in a week or so the fuzz would cool it and meanwhile he was safe as the pill because nobody knew where he was hanging in.

The only thing was that he was all alone and it gets dark pretty

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early in the woods and very quiet. Harry never realized how much he was used to hearing the cut-outs blasting and the transistor sets blaring and the rumble of the freeways blending all the sounds together for background music. And he missed the lights and the wiggy crowds that kept him company in the shop, even the sickies that talked to themselves. Harry just wasn't with the country-and-western bit, and by the time the sun went down that first night he was ready to climb the walls.

When he knew he was up tight, Harry decided to take his mind off things by doing a little occupational therapy with a bottle of juice he'd packed along. A couple of blasts and he felt better, but he still wasn't comfy-cosy about the dark shadows and the way the wind started to shiver in the tall trees around the cabin.

So he belted another slug and settled down to work. No point just sitting there and thinking about the news report—how the old chopper went sailing off down a sixty-foot drop and landed right on Grabber's spine, then smashed Kim Carmichael's arms, legs, and face—

No, it was better to do a little serious constructive work, and Harry had pen and paper and he was creative and with it, and in no time at all he was lining out some new copy for stickers. *Kick Your Hobbit,* for the Tolkien crowd, and a Zen thing, *Big Buddha Is Watching You,* and then, *Reality Is A Put-On.*

But there were shadows moving outside and the wind kept moaning and he didn't like the trees in the first place, to hell with the conservationists, and that gave Harry another inspiration; so he wrote down *Smokey The Bear Is A Pyromaniac.*

That really broke him up; he'd always hated that damned smart-aleck picture and the slogan about forest fires and for two cents and another belt from the bottle he'd start a fire himself and burn down the whole lousy setup and the Boy Scouts and the mothers and the veterans and the fuzz and the rest of the squares that bugged him, that were always bugging Harry to believe in their stinking superstitions about God and Freud and Law and Order and Love and Happiness. It was all a big yak and Harry had to laugh; he was still laughing when Dr. Carmichael walked in.

Dr. Carmichael or Professor Carmichael—Harry didn't know which it was, and it didn't matter. All he knew when the guy introduced himself was that this Carmichael was Kim Carmichael's father.

He must have tailed Harry up to the cabin all the way from town when he took off, and he'd hung around waiting until it got dark to make his move.

There he was, standing in the doorway, saying nothing except, "I'm Carmichael—Kim's father," and doing nothing but stare at

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Harry. He was a tall, skinny gray-haired cat—taught sociology or ethics or some such crud out at the U—and Harry could have taken him in one fast chop. Except that the old guy was holding an Astra .25 with the safety off. A very small gun, but the kind that makes a very big hole at close range.

"Sit down," said Carmichael, and Harry sat down. He wasn't exactly loving every minute of it, but one thing he knew for sure. Carmichael wasn't about to kill him, not after telling him to sit. He wouldn't be shooting off anything but his mouth, and this Harry could take.

He took it for about ten minutes, took it with a very straight face—all the usual jazz about, "You murderer, you killed my daughter just as surely as if you drove that motorcycle off the cliff yourself," and a lot more. Harry couldn't have cared less until Carmichael started getting to him. *Him,* personally.

"I've seen your store," Carmichael said. "I've seen the sickness you sell—the sickness of our times. Oh, I know all the rationalizations. The fix is in, the dice are loaded, you can't win for losing, all the world's a Theatre of the Absurd, life's just another Happening, and why play anything straight?

"So you and your kind put down heroes in the name of humor, you put down society in the name of satire, you put down culture and call it comedy.

"But you're not a funny man, Harry. Behind the laughter there's hatred, and behind the hatred is fear. That's the real reason for the put-downs, isn't it? Because you're afraid of everything and everyone. There's a name for your disease—paranoid fixation. You're a carrier, you infect everything you touch.

"You infect the mumbling misfits who come to your shop—the idle, would-be idol-smashers who foist their fears and vent their aggressions on the world of reality. And you infect the healthy ones, too—girls like Kim who mistake your hostility for profundity—"

"Get off my back," said Harry.

"I'm not on your back," Carmichael told him. "You're carrying your own monkey. The simian syndrome—huddling behind the bars of your cage and making faces at the world because it frightens you. Monkey sees, monkey does, and because there are thousands of others just like you, you think you've got a grasp on the truth.

"But for every thousand pedestal-topplers and icon-breakers, there are millions who still believe otherwise. And perhaps their belief is stronger than yours.

"Have you ever really thought about this faith you spend your life trying to destroy—the sustaining faith that most of the world maintains in its illusions? Belief sanctifies, you know. Belief *makes* heroes, creates beauty and honor and decency and all the other phenomena which you laugh at. You paranoid

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types can't stand heroes, can you, Harry? Not even the make-believe ones in art and literature and the mass media of TV and films. But in terms of belief they do exist, you know. Hamlet is far more *real* to us than Shakespeare, and though Conan Doyle is dead, Sherlock Holmes still has a life of his own.

"I suspect you *do* realize this, and that's why you put down the villains, too—with all the snickering about Dracula and King Kong and the little wind-up toy Frankenstein's Monster that loses its trousers when it starts to reach out for you. These things scared you when you were a kid and you're still scared; so you've got to laugh at them and pretend they're not real."

Carmichael looked down at the table and saw what Harry had been writing and he shook his head.

"*Smokey The Bear Is A Pyromaniac,*" he said. "Why, Harry? Why? Is it because you were afraid of the Three Bears when Mommy told you the story? Is it because you secretly believe there is such a creature? Well, if there's any power in faith, then the belief of millions of youngsters constitutes a force you'll never laugh away with a cheap put-down. Maybe you have good reason for your fear, Harry. Belief creates our gods, and the gods are not mocked."

That is what Carmichael told Harry before he went away.

At least he *says* he told Harry and went away, but we have only his word for it.

We do know, from a guy named Rogers who happened to be bedding down in his camper about a half mile away on the lake, that the lights went out in Harry's cabin around midnight; probably right after Harry finished the last of his whiskey.

A little while later, the growling started. The growling, and the screams.

You could hear them echoing all over the lake, but by the time Rogers stumbled through the pitch-black woods and reached the cabin there was no sound except the whispering of the wind.

Harry was dead by then; nobody could have survived the ripping and the chewing. Perhaps Carmichael was lying, maybe *he* was the crazy one and came back to descend on Harry in the darkness, to bite and slash and tear. He could even have planted that strange object on the cabin's earthen floor alongside Harry's body—the crushed and crumpled Boy Scout hat, with its rank animal odor.

Maybe so.

But nobody ever explained the pawprints.

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a *NEW* short story by

LAWRENCE TREAT

Many readers do not know how far in advance a magazine like EQMM has to work. For example, this editorial note is being written on February 13, 1968, and on this day the press is setting into type the stories to be included in our September and October issues. Thus, because of production problems and other serious difficulties, we must work at least six months in advance; actually, if you consider all the preliminary and preparatory work—reading, selecting, contracting, editing, etc.—EQMM often works on an issue a full year before it appears on sale or is mailed to subscribers . . .

Now Lawrence Treat comes through with a story that, ideally, should have been published months ago! What to do? The story simply cannot wait for normal scheduling. So we are rushing it into type, and by rearranging issues already made up, are publishing the story as quickly as possible—which, in this case, means our August issue, on sale throughout July.

Why this emergency, this reshuffling of stories? Because Lawrence Treat's new story has the impact of a page-one headline in this morning's newspaper . . .

CHANGE OF HEART

by LAWRENCE TREAT

IT'S OVER NOW. I'M ALL RIGHT AGAIN —I think.

The papers had the main facts. You probably read the accounts and saw Elena's picture, but what could they really convey to you about her? Nothing except that she was lovely. Nothing to suggest the serene, unflagging love she brought me; nothing of her rare understanding, of the way she smiled, with that lighting up of her eyes, of the joy and warmth and compassion of her.

I wish, the last time I looked into her eyes, I'd seen that joy and warmth, but I didn't. I saw fright and terror. Almost, I could say I saw the horror arising out of some foreknowledge of what was to happen. But that was impossible . . .

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We were driving. We'd gone out to the country simply because the sun was shining and the sky was blue and lovers belong out in the open, where they can let go and cavort and lie on the soft, sweet-smelling grass—if they can find any.

We didn't, and we joked about it. The ground was dumpy and itchy. Tiny red ants came out of the soil and nipped us, so we got up, laughing. Because we were together and in love. Because we'd been married a whole year, and it was months since I'd had more than a couple of drinks at any one time. I was emerging from the black pit of my own excesses, steadily regaining normality.

I had a flask in the car, and when we got back to it Elena had one drink and I had two. But I wasn't drunk.

We started back at about four in the afternoon. We decided to stop off at home to freshen up and change our clothes, and then go out to dinner at our favorite restaurant. We held hands, but Elena told me to put both of mine on the wheel. She was supercautious. Although I'm a good driver and I know she felt safe with me, she was morbidly afraid of an automobile accident. When she told me to put both hands on the wheel it was just from her normal habit of caution.

After obeying, I turned to her with a see-what-a-good-boy-am-I kind of expression. I wanted her approval. I wanted to show her that she'd tamed me, that I did things because she wanted me to, because they pleased her, and that I didn't put my arrogant little ego on the line every time she asked me to do something I thought was unnecessary.

I turned to her and smiled, and she started to smile back, but she didn't. Instead, that expression of horror crossed her eyes and she shrieked, "Pete—*look!*"

I don't know where that car came from. There was a curve, not particularly sharp, a couple of hundred feet ahead. They swept around it. They claim they weren't traveling fast, that I was. They claim I was on the wrong side of the road.

It wasn't like that at all. I was going 45 or 50, no more, while they must have been doing at least 70, and they'd crossed the center line. I didn't panic, but Elena, screaming, reacting in warning, must have shoved my arm. How else could I have swerved?

They weren't hurt, of course. Or at least not badly. There were four of them all saying the same thing. My fault. Four of them to cook up the blame so that they could collect blood money on their accident claim.

I suffered a concussion and a few bruises. I was knocked out for an hour or two, I was woozy for a while, and I spent a couple of days in the hospital. I'd been given a sedative and everything was pretty hazy when they told me, and asked

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for my permission. It seemed that there was a heart patient in the hospital, very sick, who had been there several days, and the doctors were waiting for someone with a healthy heart to die violently. Someone young, with the proper blood grouping and whatever else the doctors try to match up. Elena was the answer, but they needed my consent.

I said sure, and I'd say it again, over and over. It's what Elena would have wanted. She'd never got around to making a will—she was too young and vital to bother with a thing like that; but she had mentioned it once. Gaily, with the generosity that was typical of her, she'd said she'd like to give her body to science. Then her quick, active mind had gone on to something else.

It wasn't the first heart transplantation ever made, but the feat was still rare enough to get into the papers and attract radio and television coverage, so I won't bother going into how the medical miracle worked out. Nor do I want to describe my own wretchedness, those days and weeks when I was alone. I'd expected to go on one enormous binge and drown my sorrow in alcoholic self-commiseration, in complete violation of everything I'd held dear.

I didn't. I hardly drank. I read the papers every day and I turned my radio on every hour. I had a personal stake in the operation. I believed in Elena's heart, in its goodness and its desire to help others. It had been part of her, and it contained qualities of her which would survive. If she'd known that she was going to die so young, her one wish would have been that somehow, in some manner, her death should be of benefit to somebody.

Therefore this other person, this someone who now had Elena's heart, *had* to live. On Elena's behalf I willed it, and I had to stay sober in order to exert the full force of my will.

Doesn't make sense, does it? What could I really do? Nothing, of course. But the illusion that I could was important to me, and was perhaps the chief reason why my alcoholism was so finally and definitely cured. I had to stay sober, for Elena's sake.

At first I didn't pay much attention to who this somebody with Elena's heart was. For a while there were no pictures in the paper. A young woman named Margaret Rilkins. She was nothing to me. I hoped she'd live, and after a while it became pretty certain that she would.

I went about my business, but I couldn't stand the places where I'd been so happy with Elena. I wanted to move around, to escape from my memories and see other parts of the world, so I got a foreign assignment. After a while that was no good either, and I asked for still another assignment. I was given my

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pick of several jobs, and the one I chose was directing various branch offices throughout the state. It meant a couple of swings every year to cover the eight cities in which we operated. Say a month for each trip, and the rest of the time I'd work from home base, in the city.

You see how slowly and inevitably I went about it. I gave Margaret Rilkins plenty of time to convalesce until she was certain of health and a normal life. But she lived upstate in a city where we had an office. When I was there, all I had to do was pick up a phone directory, find her number, and call her.

I don't know when I first realized the complex, tortuous road I was taking to reach Margaret Rilkins' door. I don't even know when I first admitted the idea to my conscious mind—that it was inevitable I should be drawn to Elena's heart. She'd loved me with it. She'd said it to me so often: "Pete, I love you with all my heart."

The heart is the seat of the affections. We say so all the time. But is that merely a metaphor, a literarism invented by the poets, or does the heart really love? And if it does, what about Elena's?

When I analyzed the concept it seemed almost gruesome to me. Suppose her heart now resided in the body of an elderly man—would he love me? Could he dissociate himself from her heart? Logically, then, the whole approach was ridiculous. Except that Elena's heart was not in the body of an elderly man, and probably no elderly tissue would have accepted it. It was beating quite regularly and efficiently in the thoracic cavity of what I was informed was a young and attractive girl named Margaret Rilkins. And late that afternoon, after I'd refused dinner at the home of our local branch manager, I came back to my room in a hotel in that upstate town and sat down next to the phone.

I picked up the phone book and hefted it. Light enough in my hand, but an enormous weight on my mind. So I sat there and pretended I was not going to call Margaret Rilkins, while actually I was wondering exactly what I'd say. And how she'd react when she heard my name.

"Miss Rilkins, I'd like to come see your heart."

"Thank you, Mr. Selden, but it's not on exhibit."

I realized that I had to call her, eventually. And now that I was so close to the event I wanted to prepare myself, decide on my approach and on what questions to ask and on the best way to find out how that heart felt.

There was a nightmarish quality to meeting Miss Rilkins, and I needed to adjust and to measure myself in perspective, as a man who had enabled a woman to regain her health and naturally enough was anxious to see the result. But whether the transplant was a heart or a

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kidney or part of the digestive system was immaterial, so why get emotional about it? But how not to?

I tried to imagine myself calling one of the doctors who had performed the operation. "Doctor," I'd say, "I'm going to make contact with my wife's heart. What is your considered, professional opinion as to the probable effect on that organ? Trauma? Recoguition? What?"

"Rubbish!" he'd say. "Are you drunk?"

"Far from it. But you will have to concede that, since my wife loved me with all her heart, and since that heart is now beating within the breast of another woman, the circumstances are unusual."

"Rubbish!" he'd say again. In my lexicon it's the favorite word of the medical profession—"Rubbish!"

I picked up the phone book, looked under the R's, and called Margaret Rilkins. "This is Peter Selden," I said.

Her answer threw me. "I've been waiting for you to call."

"Oh," I said. "Well, I finally did." And I hung up.

I sat there and looked at my watch for exactly a half hour. Then I called her again. "Miss Rilkins," I said, "I'd like to apologize for hanging up, but I was kind of upset. I didn't know what to say."

"You didn't have to say anything," she said. "But I would very much like the chance to see you and thank you."

"Thank?" I said in surprise. "Me?"

"You're the only person I *can* thank, and I'm grateful. Terribly, everlastingly grateful."

"I know what you mean," I said, "but I wish you wouldn't feel that way about it. Or about me, anyhow."

"How would you like me to feel?" she asked, and there was a hint of subdued laughter in her voice.

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe I'd better come over and find out."

"Please do," she said, "Whenever you—" She broke off, and for the first time it occurred to her that maybe I wasn't a few hundred miles away. "Where are you?" she asked.

"At the Majestic, here in town. Are you free for dinner this evening?"

"Oh!" Her voice showed her shock and her fear of the encounter, and that was the first inkling I had that our meeting would be something more than that of two strangers making an effort to discuss a rather awkward topic. "Oh! I didn't know—I thought you were—" She broke off again. "Dinner, did you say? Tonight? Yes, I can, but it's all so sudden."

"In about an hour, then?"

"An hour and a half." She hesitated, and then her voice took on a firmer note, and she seemed to be regaining her confidence. "I'll be delighted," she said, "and I'll wear my very best dress. I know this is

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silly to ask, but please—tell me what I should call you. Peter? Mr. Selden? Or what?"

"Pete will do fine," I said.

"I'm Marge," she said. She lowered her voice and spoke flirtatiously. "Hello, Pete," she said.

"Hello, Marge," I said, "I'm dying to meet you."

"Me, too," she said.

I hung up, and I sat there wondering. We'd talked like a couple of adolescents setting up a blind date. *"Hello, Pete." "Hello, Marge."* We'd done just about everything except giggle.

When I drove to her apartment, which was in a swank garden building with a superb view of the lake, I was nervous. I wanted to see her, yes. I knew that she was attractive, but that had nothing to do with my reasons for having to see her. The truth was that my feelings were complex.

I was curious about her, and I foresaw a difficult situation; and I was prepared to hate her. She was a usurper. More than that, she was alive and Elena wasn't, and I resented that. I felt almost as if Marge had killed her, taken her heart and then moved in on her with the intention of taking over her title, with all its perquisites and possessions. Including me.

Marge was a brown-haired, brown-eyed, common-sensical and thoroughly desirable female who would pass anywhere. She would be at home at a night club or a football game or a PTA meeting. Wherever she went, fifty percent of the people who saw her would do so with admiration, and fifty percent wouldn't particularly notice her at all. But nobody would ever disapprove. How could they?

I don't say that I disapproved. Rather, I kept comparing her with Elena. I equated her with Elena and I knew that in the end I'd have to bring Marge to the most intimate and personal act that two people are capable of. Eventually, I had to make love to her.

Furthermore, she knew that I had to, and she was perfectly willing. Essentially that was why I was here. It was simply a question of when, of what amenities and rituals we would have to go through before we faced the question that obsessed both of us: With what heart and what mind does one love? Are we rational, civilized beings behaving in logical, socialized patterns? Or are we savages, ridden by myth, slaves of superstitution and given to primitive, irrational drives?

She met me on the same note of flirtation with which we'd left off, on the phone. "Pete," she said, "I'm so scared! All the days and days that I was in the hospital wondering about you. Did the nurses give me away and tell you about the endless questions I asked?"

"I was only there a couple of days," I said. "Then—out into the world again."

"Of course. I was forgetting. But

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I was in bed for so long, and then all those months of convalescing. And I was an invalid for years before I even went to the hospital, and so I'm really not used to the world. I say the wrong things all the time."

"You're doing pretty well," I said.

"Praise from Caesar," she said, and her eyes were sparkling. "Tell me, would you like a drink before we go out?"

"Why not wait till we get to the restaurant?" I said.

She was disappointed, and she explained herself immediately. This quality of utter candor, of never concealing and never falsifying, was her most outstanding trait. She had most of the common virtues in the usual quantities and she was average-superior in intelligence and in her general personality; but the compulsion to open up her mind in frankness made you like her instantly. Or at least, as soon as you were aware of what she was doing.

"Pete," she said, "I'd like to make you a drink anyhow, because I've never had the chance to be a real hostess before, and I've been practising. I was an invalid ever since my late teens—but I just told you that, didn't I? Anyhow, I missed a lot of things that other girls just picked up as they went along."

"Like martinis?" I said.

She nodded. "Three and a half to one, with a twist of lemon. And ice-cold. Is that right?"

"Right," I said.

While she went into her small kitchen I studied the room. I began by being critical, appraising the color scheme, passing judgment on the rug, on the style of furniture, on her taste in draperies. Then I noticed the books, and I was disturbed. I saw my favorite titles, ranged alphabetically, the way Elena and I had set them up. With a growing curiosity I glanced at Marge's records, and again I found almost a duplicate of my own collection. I bent down to check them more carefully, and I felt relieved. The Mahler, the Bruckner, the Webern—oh, no! Not my taste.

I stood up and strolled over to the window and I was standing there waiting for Marge when she came out of the kitchen. She was carrying a small tray that had two glasses and a small shaker. Each glass was frosty, and one of them had a small nick on which a tiny bit of yellow rind had caught. There were four tiny caviar sandwiches on a plate next to the glasses.

I poured. It was a good martini, obviously made to my specifications. I didn't know how Marge had found out, but she'd made them exactly as Elena used to—the chilled glass waiting in the refrigerator, the lemon peel rubbed along the rim of the glass, the caviar canapés on the side. Little extra touches that may not make a great deal of difference, but which had come to have a special and personal meaning.

We touched glasses, Marge and I, but I was puzzled by the look she

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gave me, and I gulped my drink down as fast as I decently could. For some reason I didn't want to sit there and drink martinis with Marge, the way I used to with Elena. And the worst of it was that intuitively Marge caught my feeling and acted on it, for as soon as my glass was empty she suggested leaving. When we went out, she'd had only a sip or two.

I was annoyed without knowing why, but gradually I figured out my reason. Marge wanted to *be* Elena. That was her whole idea. In that romantic, female brain of hers she was already in love with me, and if I didn't stop her she'd go ahead and say it. She'd say, "I love you with all my heart."

I had to prevent that.

We had another drink in the restaurant, but it didn't go to my head, or to Marge's, either. We were sounding each other out, wondering which of us would be the first to break through the barriers and talk about the one subject uppermost in both our minds.

She did, however, answer one of my questions before I even asked it. "I noticed you were looking at my books," she said.

"Yours?" I said.

She smiled. "And my records."

"I hate Mahler," I said.

"So do I," she said blandly. "Pete, you looked so puzzled when you saw those titles. I was in the kitchen, but I peeked. You thought it was a kind of magic, didn't you?"

"It seemed like something more than a coincidence."

"It certainly was," she said. "Your friends used to visit me at the hospital, and I asked all kinds of questions about you. But I mentioned that before, didn't I?"

"At least I don't have to believe in miracles," I said.

"Oh, but you do!" she said.

Marge was smart, much too smart to mention Elena. She had prepared for this meeting with me. She had a specific object in mind, and she had almost everything going for her. She had keen insights that enabled her to guess much of what I was thinking. She was anxious to tell me that she was worth having, that if I married her I'd have no regrets. And she wanted to marry me, practically told me so.

She didn't propose. She was too wise, too adult to do anything so crude. Rather, she presented a picture of Margaret Rilkins with a thoroughness that would have satisfied even a personnel director. And she did it tactfully, too.

For instance, she told me she had a great deal of money, but she gave me the information obliquely. She spoke of a few of her stocks and said they'd gone up last week, and she said it in a context that let me know that her holdings were large. She mentioned the D.A.R. and said she didn't go to meetings, they were too fuddy-duddy, and besides, she was a liberal—which was a way of bragging about her social back-

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ground and informing me about her politics. She'd found out what mine were, and she dropped a phrase here and there to let me know that she thought along the same lines. Sympathy, empathy—apathy.

Exemplary.

I figured she'd come out with the rest of it soon, but obliquely. She'd say that she loved swimming and modern painting and ballet and antique cars, and that she hated advertising and grade-B movies. She'd researched me and she probably had a long list of my likes and dislikes, and she could go right down the line. And the worst of it was that she was being perfectly honest, she wasn't straining: she did like swimming and modern painting and ballet and antique cars, and she'd like everything else I ever liked or ever would. Because she was made for me, wasn't she? She was like Elena. Her body had accepted Elena's heart, with all its chemico-physico-kinetic-electromagnetic idiosyncrasies.

Great!

I sound sarcastic, but I don't mean to be. You see, I was fighting something, without knowing what I was fighting, or why. What part of me objected to Marge? I don't really know. Perhaps I ascribed to her thoughts and feelings she didn't really have, and therein lay the awful strangeness, the madness. At times I was sitting at a restaurant table and speaking to Marge, and a moment later I was talking directly to Elena's heart, which had loved me and understood me even better than I understood myself.

Marge and I had a long, slow dinner, full of covert glances, quick smiles, and understanding looks. I never so much as touched her hand. I was careful not to. I kept my knees to myself, and she did the same. Nevertheless we made love to each other. Without having said a word she seemed to be asking me to sleep with her that night.

When we left the restaurant we were both silent. For Marge, what we were leading up to was a tremendous thing, and although she had dreamed it and deliberately maneuvered it and still wanted it, her approaching moment of truth scared her. Whereas for me, it was a lesser thing.

She should have postponed it, when we reached her apartment house. She should have held out her hand, murmured something about what a nice evening it had been, and then smiled, got out of the car, and vanished. That would have been the proper thing to do, under the circumstances.

But she didn't. She sat there so expectantly. It occurred to me that on an earlier date, more than two years ago, Elena had sat in this same car, had smiled at me, had murmured her good night. And I'd grabbed her before she could slide out of the seat, and I'd proposed that same evening.

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But Marge sat there so expectantly.

"I've had a long day," I said, "and I have some important things coming up tomorrow. Mind if I just leave you here?"

She drew in her breath, and I felt sorry for her. "I think I do mind," she said. Then she gave me a forced stretch of her lips. "But what can I do?" she said. "Will I see you soon again?"

"Tomorrow," I said.

I don't know why I made it so soon. I should have waited, in order to change our pace and readjust our relationship. But tomorrow? In twenty-four hours? I was quite aware that she'd hardly sleep all night, that she'd be home practically all day doing nothing except worry, because she was quite aware of the crisis between us, and that it had to resolve itself the next time we met.

I know that she sat home all day, hoping I'd phone and give her some clue to my intentions. I didn't. I had a short session at the office that I'd come to supervise, and then I pleaded personal business and left. I drove out to the country. I don't remember where. I don't remember whether I had anything to eat or not, because I couldn't keep my mind on anything except this one matter.

Marge—Elena. What kind of guy was I, anyhow?

Maybe I'd better describe the problem as simply as I can. Marge was in love with me—but with what part of her? Her mind was her own, and she thought and remembered exactly as she always had before the operation. But did she *feel* the same? Would she love me with her heart? And if so, was it *her* heart? Had she made it entirely her own?

She'd given me a logical explanation of how she'd learned so much about me. She'd asked questions about my books and my records and my taste in cocktails, and dozens of other things as well. No mystery there. But even so, even if there was a perfectly logical explanation of how Marge had obtained her information, nevertheless I had to find out *why*. Did she want to be like Elena because of a perfectly normal interest in knowing something about a woman with whom she was now bound so closely, and therefore something about that woman's husband, too? Or did Elena's heart compel Marge, regardless of fact or reason, to *become* Elena? That was the question I had to answer.

The tension of not knowing was unbearable, and I had no sure means of ever finding out. That was when I finally made up my mind.

I went to see Marge in the evening. We were both tense and nervous, until Marge with her customary candor came out and stated what the trouble was.

"I'm terribly upset," she said,

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"and so are you, and I think we'd better do something about it."

"That's right," I said. "I've been thinking about it all day long. I guess I'm a pretty mixed-up guy, but it's a pretty mixed-up world, isn't it?"

"Yes," she said.

I had an almost uncontrollable impulse to grab her and throw her down on the sofa and bury my head against her breasts. They were wide and full, and I kept thinking that underneath the left one and a little way down, Elena's heart was beating. If I put my ear against the soft, warm flesh I'd hear the heartbeat.

Elena, my love.

I stared, and I think Marge read my thought, but she kept standing there and waiting.

It's over now, and I'm all right again—I think. But I can't call the police quite yet, not until I'm certain that the heart has been still so long that it can never, never beat again. I have to be careful of that, just as I had to be careful where I shot her. Not through the heart, because—because it's not her heart. It's Elena's.

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